

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

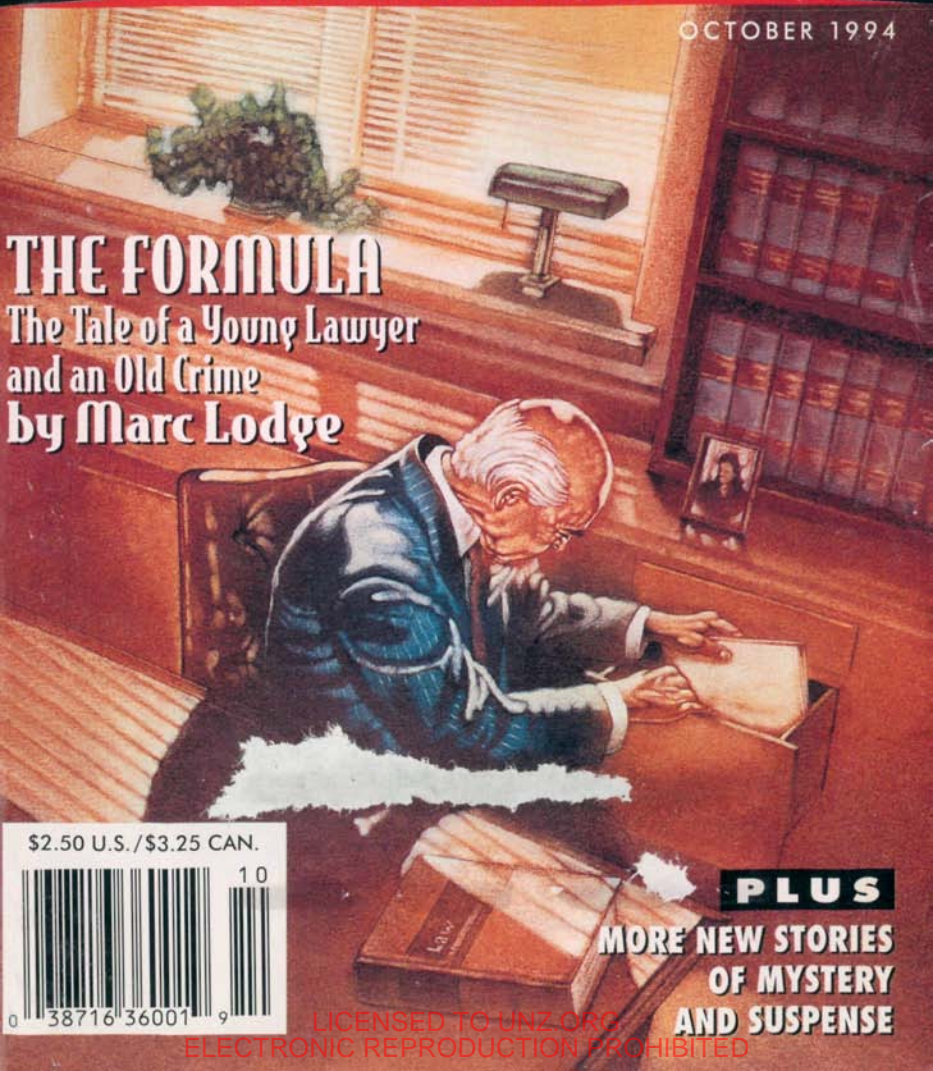
M A G A Z I N E

OCTOBER 1994

THE FORMULA

The Tale of a Young Lawyer
and an Old Crime

by Marc Lodge



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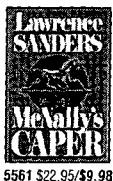
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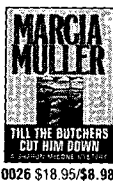
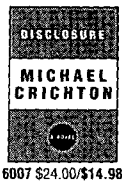
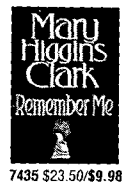


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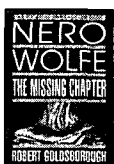
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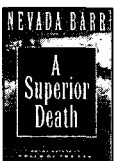
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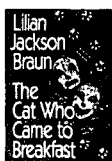
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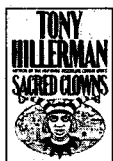
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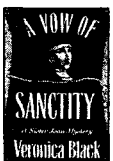
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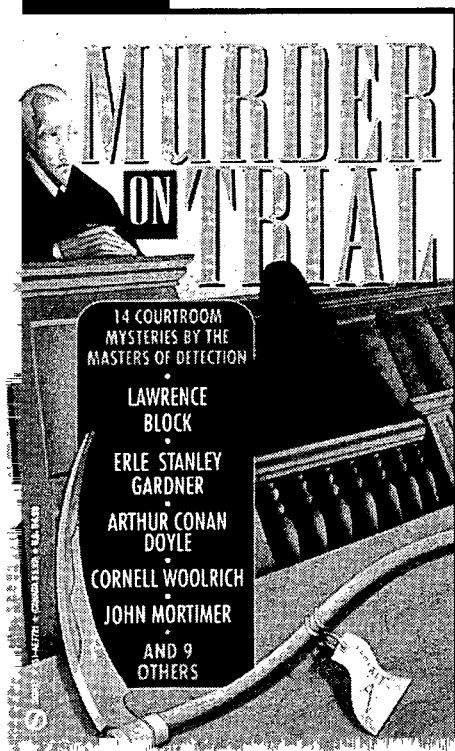
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Susan Teitz

In this issue we have a Mystery Classic by an old friend, some new friends, and a special announcement.

The author of "And Beauty the Prize," our Mystery Classic, has a long association with the Hitchcock name. A prolific TV scriptwriter, Henry Slesar wrote for the popular series of the fifties and sixties, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. The story in this issue was adapted for television and aired in February 1961 as "The Throwback." "The Trouble with Ruth," his first story for AHMM, appeared in the January 1957 issue.

This month's cover story, "The Formula," is Marc Lodge's first published short story. Lodge is an attorney from Raleigh, North Carolina; his first novel, *Within the Bounds*, was published by Putnam last year.

Also new to us is Michael

Shea, author of "Pick and Grim." Widely published in a number of genres, he has been a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards (science fiction's top honors), and won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel in 1983.

Writers and aspiring writers in our midst should pay special attention to this issue's inside back cover. In conjunction with the publication of author Alison Lurie's new book, *Women and Ghosts*, due out in September, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday is sponsoring a ghost story contest. The winning story will earn its author \$500. If you're interested, be sure to read the rules carefully.

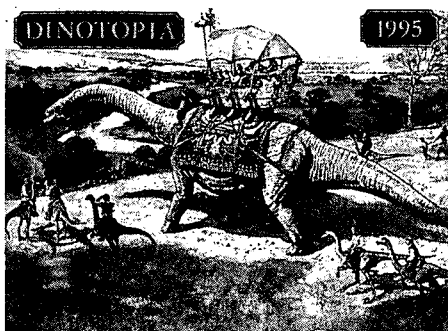
But please, don't skip this issue's wonderful stories to do so!

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FICTION



THE FORMULA

by Marc Lodge

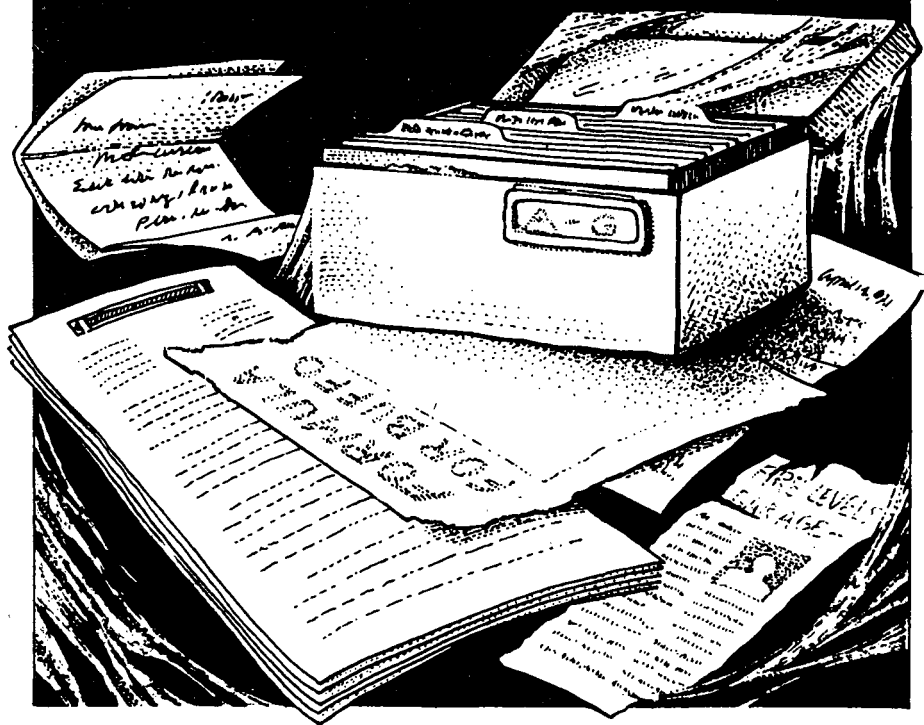


Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Ann Whalington Britain, senior partner in the law firm of Haverly & Carwick, frowned at the tall young associate sitting on the other side of her desk. "An unfavorable result in this case, Jem, could cost the firm its largest client." She carefully laid a manila file folder on the opposite side of the wood surface and leaned back.

Jeremy Thomas Anderson returned a nervous smile and fingered a suspender as he looked at the file label: BI ENTERPRISES V. NEWSOME. He glanced out the window of Britain's fortieth floor corner office. Ten blocks away across the Queenston skyline, the famous triangular logo of BI Enterprises on the company's world headquarters building was at his eye level. BI was a billion dollar conglomerate, one of the largest companies in the South. Haverly & Carwick, H&C to the cognoscenti, was a four hundred lawyer firm, with billings in the millions, but BI still accounted for some fifteen or twenty percent of the firm's total revenue.

She couldn't be serious. "I've never worked on one of their matters," Jem said. He was only three years out of Duke law school, long enough to value experience over academic achievement but not long

enough to have gathered that experience.

Britain toyed with her gold fountain pen. "We have one of these every five years or so. Just a nuisance, I'm afraid, but it has to be handled. BI worries about it because it involves Buffo." She sniffed with a disapproving air. "BI began this case in-house. As usual, they need us to bail them out."

Jem took notes on his legal pad as she talked. He himself used a disposable pen from the firm's supply room.

"You know about Buffo, I assume."

"The car wax."

"To BI, it's more than just a car wax. They consider it the foundation of their empire. Silly, really, with the airline and the chain of auto supply stores and the railroad involvement and all the other transportation tie-ins, but for historical reasons, I suppose, they consider Buffo sacrosanct. When a claim like this one comes along, alleging ownership of the formula to Buffo, everyone over there quakes in their boots."

"Isn't the formula a big secret? They keep it locked up somewhere?"

Britain rolled her eyes. "At the world headquarters on Benson Street. In a concrete vault, fifty feet below the surface of

the earth, with a twenty-four hour armed guard. The Constitution should have such protection."

Jem waited. She looked out at the BI Tower. "It's a strange client in some ways," Britain said. "The founder still goes to the office several times a week. If he whispers, they jump. He's like a god over there." She smiled. "A little like Mr. Carwick here. They were very close."

Eldridge Kingston Carwick, the Carwick of Haverly & Carwick, was another part of the mingled BI/H&C legend. Mr. Carwick had been the lawyer for the founder, Randall Jessup, a soap salesman who had invented Buffo in his garage, then displayed a marketing genius and sense for synergistic acquisitions that became the object of worship in the nation's leading business schools. At ninety, Jessup ranked among the twenty wealthiest Americans on lists that, according to rumor, failed to take into account the bulk of his fortune, which was buried in densely layered trusts and holding companies.

Mr. Carwick had created that structure and, allegedly, had amassed his own substantial fortune from an early investment in BI. He was past ninety himself but came to the

firm offices almost daily. Ann Britain currently was BI Enterprises' chief outside lawyer, but Eldridge Carwick remained the founder's closest personal adviser.

Britain's phone buzzed. She listened for a moment, said, "Give me five minutes," and hung up. She frowned at Jem. "The damn Louisville takeover again." Jem smiled sympathetically.

Britain spoke briskly. "Look at the file. This fellow Newsome began to sell a car wax and called it Buffum. BI's trademark people filed for an injunction. Newsome's lawyer, some clown named Tolbert, has filed a bogus counterclaim. The gist is that Newsome has ownership rights to Buffo, that this is the same formula as Buffo, and that BI has infringed his property. Obviously a desperation ploy, clearly barred by the statute of limitations."

She shrugged. "He'll follow it with a request that we produce the Buffo formula. They always do." She shook her head at the foolishness of it all. "Check with the file room; by now, we have an automatic pattern in these cases. You'll need to depose Newsome, investigate his claims, then prepare a motion for summary judgment. You can find some briefs in the files; just update them. If Newsome

has any money, ask for attorneys' fees to discourage this sort of thing." She picked up the phone, dismissing Jem. "Give me a memo on your plans, then we'll talk, then we'll squash him like a bug."

Tim Newsome toyed with the collar of his green knit golf shirt and stared at Jem with a wrinkled brow. "I don't understand the question."

His lawyer, Bertrand Tolbert, grunted; his fleshy jowls hung nearly to the open dirt-stained collar of his white shirt. "Whaddya say?" he growled.

Jem sighed. Newsome was a young man with an open face that invited instant trust. Jem believed his story so far, but as the firm taught, he tried to maintain a skeptical tone in his questions, that would, of course, not appear in the written transcript. He rephrased the questions. "You claim this is your grandfather's formula, correct?"

Newsome nodded.

"You have to answer out loud so she can take it down." Jem pointed to the court reporter.

"It is my grandfather's formula," Newsome said.

"How did it come into your possession?"

"My mother died last year. We found it in the attic, in a

box of things that came from her father."

"Who is we?"

"My sister and I."

Tolbert groaned. His waist shifted from one side to the other as he pushed himself up in his chair, then settled back down. "You already asked that, kid. Several times. Let's get on with it."

"I can conduct my own deposition, thank you." Jem flipped through his legal pad, then looked at Newsome. "How did you know what it was?"

"It said 'Formula for Buffo' across the top. And I am a chemical engineer. I recognized the ingredients."

"Do you have it here?"

"No."

Jem turned to Tolbert. "For the record, we would like that paper produced."

"You really want it attached to this transcript?"

"No. Keep it separate."

"Fine. We will produce it at the same time as you produce the formula for the version of Buffo that your client manufactures."

"Don't be ridiculous." Jem glared at Tolbert. "Your client is the one who claims to have obtained the formula. We are entitled to the basis for that claim."

"Your client started this litigation, counselor. Put up or shut up."

Jem's patience began to wear thin. This had been three hours crammed into Tolbert's office—Tolbert had no conference room—and Jem was attempting to juggle his files and legal pad on his lap and the floor while asking questions. Only the court reporter appeared comfortable. The fat lawyer had refused to come to the adequate surroundings at H&C. Typical plaintiff lawyer crap.

Jem glanced at the court reporter. She sat blank-faced at her steno machine. He wondered if she realized when he made a mistake.

"Let me go at this a different way," he said, ignoring the "Awww, jeez," from Tolbert. "You have never seen the formula for Buffo, have you, Mr. Newsome?"

Newsome phrased his answer carefully. "I have never seen the formula that BI uses."

"Then on what basis do you contend it is the same as the one in your mother's attic?"

Newsome began to tick points off on his fingers. "One, the end products look and perform identically, except for color. BI added coloring. Two, I have a friend at a gas chromatography lab. He tested both; they are identical except for insignificant trace elements. The coloring again. Three, everyone

in my family knows that my grandfather invented Buffo."

"How do you know that?"

"My grandmother told us. She said my grandfather and Jessup were friends and partners. Grandfather made the first batches of Buffo in his garage. Then Jessup stole the formula."

Jem looked at Tolbert. "For the record, that is of course hearsay."

Tolbert waved his hand. "This is a deposition, counselor. Come on, get on with it."

Back to Newsome. "How exactly did this alleged theft happen?"

"I don't know."

"If it happened, it was more than fifty years ago, wasn't it?"

"It was whenever Buffo was invented."

"Did your grandfather pursue this in court?"

"He died."

"What about your grandmother?"

"She was afraid."

"Is she alive?"

"No."

In another hour, Jem ran out of questions. Tolbert followed him to the door. "Kid, tell your bosses they better settle this one. Fast. 'Cause your client ain't gonna like it when word gets out. Or when we get mad and release our formula to the press."

"Is this blackmail, Bertrand?"

"Gimme a break, kid. Run on home to mommy and tell them to settle."

"Assuming hypothetically that I knew the formula, I would have to say that it cannot be confirmed by gas chromatography." Dr. Carrington Timmons leaned back in his office chair with a smug expression and looked at where the office window would have been on any other floor of the BI World Headquarters building. For security purposes, this floor, the lab floor, had no windows.

"Why not?"

"Because that process reveals only certain compounds and elements *after* combination. It does not show what went into the stew, as it were."

"But if they are identical except for traces . . ."

"It could be the traces, my boy. That could be the distinguishing feature. Soap is soap, wax is wax, except for traces. The traces are what make Buffo special."

Jem searched the man's face for signs of deception or doubt; he found none. The chief chemist looked back at him with a bland expression. "Could you

test this other stuff for me?" Jem asked finally.

Timmons displayed his first moment of hesitation. "We need special authorization to put Buffo through a gas chromatograph."

"Why, if you can't recreate it from the results?"

"Company policy, my boy. But I will look into it. Leave me a sample."

"The grandfather's name was Will Brunstone." Jem handed the BI archivist a paper with the man's name and possible date of death.

She looked at it dubiously. "I'll see what I can find. Unfortunately, some of our earlier holdings are not well indexed. I've asked for more staff, but the priorities are in the airline, they say."

"Would it help if we went through the files? I have people who can do that. Our paralegals, you know."

She hesitated. "I'm afraid not. Not without authorization. Company policy, you know."

The firm's chief files administrator, Eloise Smoot, laid a four inch printout on Jem's desk. "These are the files on the computer. They go back to World War II." She opened a box of three by five index cards. "These are the pre-war files.

We haven't bothered to put them on the computer."

Jem leafed through some of the index cards. They were yellowing, written in a flowing old-style script. Some corners crumbled in his hand. He looked at Eloise.

She shrugged. "I'm afraid the rats got to some of them over the years. In the old building. We asked the firm to give us the people to put these on the computer, too, but priorities, you know. We can barely keep up with the new matters."

"They're not in alphabetical order?"

"No. By lawyer, chronologically. Most of the BI files are under Mr. Carwick—he was the chief BI lawyer back then. The company was called Buffo International then, you know. Until they bought the race track and the tire company."

He looked at the Carwick cards, about two inches of them, and picked one at random. Eloise pointed to some numbers written in the corner. "This is the box number for the archives. Then we have another list that correlates box numbers with warehouse shelf. They're usually right; sometimes we find a mistake."

"What happens then?"

She shrugged. "Then it's lost."

He spent an hour sorting through the cards. Most of them said "Buffo." He asked for all the files.

"Give us a week," Eloise said when he gave her the list.

The files arrived from the warehouse, and Jem deposited them and Miranda Beliz into a small conference room. "Sort them out," he said. "Sorry. We're looking for any references to Brunstone or the formula for Buffo."

Miranda was a very imaginative paralegal who had wanted to be a lawyer until she began to work in a law firm and discovered what lawyers do all day. Now she wanted to be a librarian. She rolled her eyes and surveyed the mountain of corrugated boxes that were stacked against the wall.

"If anything squeals at me when I open the box," she said, "I quit."

Jem grinned. "All for the firm."

In his office, he had a message to call May Curtin. He could not recall who she was until he recognized the phone number: the BI archivist.

"We have located some very early correspondence files for the years you requested. I went through them and saw only one reference to a William Brunstone: a letter to a Mrs. Brun-

stone offering sympathy for her husband's death."

"Can you send it over?"

She hesitated. "This is from the founder's personal file; I need authorization for that."

"I'll have legal call you."

Legal was a classmate of Jem's from law school. Legal also was dubious. "I don't know about the founder's files. Let me check with the general counsel."

Britain studied Jem's memo as he sat staring at the BI logo. She muttered to herself and made notes in the margin. When she finished, she looked up at him. "Have they answered our interrogatories yet?"

"I gave him a few more days. They're due next week."

"See what they say, then we'll decide." She flipped through the memo. "Forget the chromatograph; BI will never allow it. They're too nervous about the formula."

"I asked for Newsome's test results."

She nodded. "That might do it, if we can believe him. Now, the founder's files, that's the big problem?"

"Yeah. Apparently there's some reference to Brunstone, but the archivist is afraid to produce it. I need you to talk to someone over there."

Britain shook her head in amusement. "I told you—a strange client." She sighed and looked at her watch. "I have a meeting with them this afternoon on the merger; I'll talk to the man then." She looked at the memo again. "How long until you have the motion ready?"

"I need the interrogatory answers, and the response to the requests for admission. Probably a couple of weeks after that."

"Keep it moving. They'll start to show some interest if I ask for the founder's files. We don't have any reason to doubt the result yet, do we?"

"Can't guarantee a summary judgment. There may be issues of fact. But we do have the statute of limitations argument."

"Don't tell them there may be factual issues. We'll deal with that after we see your motion." She rose. "Have you talked to Mr. Carwick yet?"

"No."

"See him. If this Brunstone really did exist, he might know something about him."

Jem could not tell if Mr. Carwick's head shook from palsy or as a negative gesture. Then he worried that the old man might not have understood him. He was about to ask again when

Mr. Carwick said, "Brunstone. What was that first name?"

"William. William D."

"Billy Brunstone." He tapped his fingers lightly on the desk. "It sounds familiar, but . . ."

Jem began to speak, but Mr. Carwick raised a single finger. "A chemist, I believe. Or a baker. Some sort of fellow who fooled around with chemicals. Died in a fire. Sad, very sad. I might have gone to his funeral. What about him?"

Mr. Carwick apparently had forgotten Jem's explanation. He was ninety-three, after all. "His grandson claims that this Brunstone knew the formula for Buffo."

The old man chuckled. "Nonsense. He was a baker or a cook or something. Buffo is car wax. Randall would never tell him the formula." He cocked his head as if a memory came to him. "That's right. Randall lived next door to Billy Brunstone. It was a very close call, I tell you. A very close call." He rose and stood precariously, peering at Jem. "Thank you for coming in . . ."

"Jem."

"Yes, of course. James. Thank you for coming in, James. I have enjoyed talking with you."

As he listened to Tolbert over the phone, Jem pictured the fat

lawyer's sweat-soaked collar. "Kid, where's your settlement offer?"

"There won't be one."

"Come on. Timmy isn't greedy here. Just give him enough to let him think he got justice, and we'll be on our way. You can't take the chance, kid."

Jem decided to try to talk some sense into him, although it probably would be futile. "BI's policy is not to settle cases like this. They can't afford to open the floodgates. Even if you had a claim, it's barred by the statute of limitations. You're talking, fifty, sixty years here."

"Which statute of limitations?"

"Take your choice. Contracts. Conversion or misappropriation of trade secrets. Whatever your claim is. Nothing survives that long."

Tolbert snorted in his ear. "Kid, lift your head out of the law books and look around. Your client can't afford this."

"Where are my interrogatory answers?"

"Screw those. You know how much work it is to answer those things? Oppressive. Burdensome."

"Tell it to the judge."

"No. I'll tell it to you. I'm sending you some stuff, kid. Look at it and call me. With your offer."

*

Miranda wrinkled her nose as she held the paper between her thumb and forefinger. "Watch your desk," she said. "It has some sort of grime on it."

Jem turned it delicately to read it. It was a brownish carbon, shiny and brittle, from 1937. He read aloud. "Memo to File. From E. K. Carwick. Certain documents formerly herein have this date been transferred to File 'Brunstone, W. D.'"

He looked at Miranda. "What file did this come from?"

"It was labeled 'Jessup, Randall, Miscellaneous.' One of Mr. Carwick's files."

"Okay. Where's the Brunstone file?"

"There isn't one that I see. Either in the boxes or in the card index." She waved at a spot on her dress. "Look at that. I searched through every box. There's some sort of dust that just sticks to you."

"Did you ask Eloise?"

"She has no record of it. She said maybe Mr. Carwick would know."

"What else was in the Jessup file?"

She shook her head. "Miscellaneous, like it said. A few letters about buying some property, some dispute with the phone company about a bill, a few memos about meetings."

Miranda rummaged through her briefcase. "I found some other references to William D. Brunstone." She pulled more papers out and piled them on Jem's desk. "Here is his death certificate. A fire at his house. Here's a copy of a newspaper article about it. The cause was unknown, but they said he had a laboratory in his garage, and they speculate it started there. It was in the middle of the night."

Jem glanced at the article while she rummaged through her papers. The fire was in 1937. The firm had been founded only a year before.

Miranda produced another photocopy. "Here, this is interesting. The alarm was called in by his next door neighbor, Randall Jessup. I guess it's *the* Randall Jessup. This was before Buffo, wasn't it?"

The earliest Buffo files were from 1938; from Jem's readings, the product had taken off during World War II. "I wonder if there's some way to check."

She produced more papers. "Here's the chain of title to both properties; I ran the owners through letter purchases. Here are birth certificates for Newsome's mother. She is in fact Brunstone's daughter, so that part is true, at least. And she did die last year."

*

"A file? Brunstone?" Mr. Carwick wrinkled his brow. The shaking grew more pronounced. He gazed at a picture on his office wall, a landscape of the early BI headquarters now preserved as a museum on the company's headquarters campus. After a moment, the gaze became a stare, and Jem worried that he had drifted off.

Suddenly Mr. Carwick snapped his head straight up. "Yes," he said as if Jem had just entered the room. Then he turned, pulled a key from his vest pocket, and opened a locked file drawer in the credenza behind him. He bent over, his nose no more than an inch from the file labels, and pawed through them, muttering the entire time. From the other side of the desk, Jem could not make out the mutters or see the files.

Mr. Carwick grunted and shut the file drawer, carefully locking it. "No, James," he said. "No Brunstone. I seem to recall that name, but it's been a very long time, you know. Was the file memo dated?"

"Yes, sir. Nineteen thirty-seven. It was in the old style files, the ones by lawyer."

"Yes, that was very long ago then. We changed filing systems in 1958, as I recall. June. When Mrs. Halstead came to

the file room. I remember her saying to me, 'Mr. Carwick,' she said, 'we have to modernize this system.' Now, of course, we have the computers. They began in 1974. One of the earliest systems in a firm this size, I believe . . ."

Jem left twenty minutes later, educated in the history of the firm's filing techniques but unenlightened as to the location of the files.

The delivery from Tolbert sat on his desk. It was copies of three single-page documents and several handwritten pages held together by a binder clip.

The first page had been copied with a blank paper over most of it. The only legible portion was the top: "FORMULA FOR BUFFO" was written in block printing across the page. Under it, in new ink, was, "Kid, your client won't like it if I produce the real formula, so I have redacted the rest of this to save your butt. Thank me later. Tolbert."

Another single page document was a letter:

COPY

April 12.

Dear Jessup,

Re our discussion. I propose a fifty-fifty split of both profits and costs of operation; my capital con-

tribution to be the formula and initial supplies, yours the advertising matter, postage, etc. We both contribute the "elbow grease" until revenues support salaries. For the nonce, we can work out of my garage. Your idea about promoting this product as a "secret" formula is nonsense. I plan to take immediate steps to apply for a patent, which will provide ample protection to us for an adequate period of time. Keep the lawyers out of it. Perhaps you can afford to pay them, but I certainly cannot. This will serve as our agreement. Sign below to confirm.

It was unsigned.

The last page was another letter:

April 20.

*My dear Mrs. Brunstone,
Please accept my deepest sympathy over the untimely death of your husband in the tragic fire that so shocked us all. Billy was a dear friend, and we shall all miss him.*

My best to you and the children. Please do not hesitate to call on me if I can provide you with any assistance whatsoever.

*Sincerely,
Randall Jessup.*

Jem leafed through the clipped pages. The cover sheet was a piece of Tolbert's letterhead with the handwritten words "From Brunstone Lab Notes." The remaining dozen sheets were photocopies of a different handwriting—he thought it was the same as the first letter—and appeared to deal with tests of various mixtures of car wax. Each entry contained a time and date statement, from the spring of 1937. On the last page, the entry read: "Monday, April 15, 1937, 10 A.M. Final Formula—Mix 132—Clear and hard drying. Prepared production samples, per RJ instructions sent to EC in advance of meeting tomorrow."

There also was a report from a gas chromatography laboratory company. The two samples submitted were identical in all significant respects, it said.

Miranda had left for the night; the conference room smelled of the musty file folders and the dusty boxes from the warehouse. He rummaged through the file cabinet and found her copies of the newspaper clippings. The fire was described in one dated Wednesday, April 16, 1937.

*A local baker perished
last night in a conflagration
that destroyed his*

house and outbuildings and threatened those of neighbors.

William D. Brunstone, 25, of 144 Jellicoe Street was found in the ashes of his garage, following a blaze that required four companies of local firefighters to bring under control. The garage was destroyed completely in the fire, which apparently was fed by chemicals stored by the deceased, an amateur chemist. The main house also suffered significant damage, according to fire officials, and will require demolition for safety purposes.

Two firefighters suffered minor injuries, and several others were treated and released for smoke inhalation. Brunstone's wife and children were away visiting relatives at the time.

The fire apparently started in the garage, according to neighbors who alerted the fire department at 11:55 P.M. It spread rapidly and threatened houses next door. "I was at a church social with a group of several hundred individuals," said next door neighbor Randall Jessup, "and arrived

home to find the firemen hosing down my roof. They would not let me in."

Jessup, a friend of the deceased, speculated that the fire began with a laboratory experiment gone awry. "He was constantly mixing things up in there," Jessup stated.

Brunstone was a baker and entrepreneur, according to his friend and lawyer Eldridge Carwick, who expressed shock and dismay at the death. "He was an outstanding member of the community and will be sorely missed."

Other friends and associates echoed Mr. Carwick's sentiments . . .

Jem had lifted his hand to knock on Britain's closed door when the senior lawyer's secretary saw him and shook her head in alarm. She hustled up to him and spoke in a whisper. "She is in conference and can't be disturbed."

Jem looked at her cubicle. A husky man in a black suit leaned against her desk. Another man, in the same outfit, lounged against the file cabinet wall, staring at the closed office door. Both men appeared bored but alert. Jem bent closer to the secretary and whispered back, "This is important."

"Mr Carwick is in there." She looked over her shoulder at the men and lowered her voice even more. "With Mr. Jessup."

"Jessup?"

She nodded in awe. "He came in about ten minutes ago. Mr. Jessup almost never goes anywhere, you know. So it's a real feather in Ms. Britain's cap."

Jem had started away when Britain's office door opened. She glanced at him in surprise, then nodded to the men in the secretarial cubicle. They pushed past Jem into the office and emerged, one holding the door, the other pushing a wheelchair containing a desiccated figure with an old fashioned car blanket across its knees. They left without a word.

"James." Mr. Carwick nodded to Jem as he passed. He had an old file folder tucked under his arm. Jem could make out "B-R-U-N..." on it. Britain tapped him on the shoulder and gestured toward her office.

"The client has decided to settle this Newsome case."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "It's the client's call. Apparently Mr. Carwick happened to mention it to Mr. Jessup, and he decided that's what he wants to do. I don't know why exactly, but I speculate that he is nervous about this formula disclosure

nonsense. Did you talk with Mr. Carwick about that?"

"Not about the formula."

"Then maybe he looked in the file himself. Mr. Carwick takes quite an interest in the BI matters. Anyway, I told you they were sensitive about it. I am ordered to negotiate with Tolbert myself. So send up the file, and I'll take care of it. Thank you for your help."

He turned to leave.

"Jem," she stopped him. "You did a fine job, and they should have let you finish. But sometimes clients get a weird notion. Mr. Carwick was impressed with your work. He made me promise to use you on other BI cases."

Mr. Carwick was in his office in the dim light of dusk. The folder labeled BRUNSTONE was on his desk. He looked at Jem with a squint. "What is it, James?"

"What happened to Billy Brunstone, Mr. Carwick?"

Carwick emitted a dry chuckle. "He died. Playing with fire. You should never play with fire."

"Was it his formula?"

The old man ignored him. His voice grew distant, his eyes less focused. "Greedy, too. Sometimes when you want too much, you end up with none.

He should have taken the twenty-five percent that Randall offered. Half, that was too much. Randall could get the money somewhere else. And he did, after Billy died."

"Was it his formula?"

"The product doesn't matter, James, it's what you do with it. Marketing, that's the key. This secret formula nonsense, that's just marketing. Randall had everything lined up—customers, endorsements. Then Billy got greedy. He thought the formula was worth half. Hell, Randall's a genius. We could have put lard in that jar and Randall would have sold it. Anyone with any sense could see that."

"Did Randall Jessup start the fire?"

"The way to grow a law firm, James, remember this when you're older, the way to grow a law firm is to grow the client. Get a client with vision, one who will grow, and nurture that client. That's what we did here, Barton Haverly and I. Gave Randy some seed money, took some stock, and kept his business by giving him good service."

The old man leaned back in his chair now, staring at the ceiling. "Time to time, Randy would make noises about hiring some other law firms. It's like a marriage. You have good

days and bad days. But then I'd have a little chat with him and remind him of our history together and certain of our services in the past and then we'd kiss and make up. But he's an old man now, in that wheelchair, and I'm an old man and before long, neither one of us will be around to keep the marriage together."

He looked at Jem with a sharp, appraising glare. "Britain can't do it. She cares too much about mergers and airlines, and not enough about the core business. Never forget the core business." He sighed and shook his head. "And you're too young. Hell, you're not even a partner. But I suppose you can keep your mouth shut, can't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I searched your desk. You've kept your mouth shut so far, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The old man stood. "Give me some legal advice, boy. Tell me about the attorney-client privilege. If a client confesses a crime to me, can I tell anyone?"

"No, sir."

"That's good legal advice, James. I came to you for advice, and you rendered it. That makes me your client, so to speak, for purposes of the privilege, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"Then here." Mr. Carwick slid the folder across the table to Jem. "This will help you make partner, boy. Keep it locked up. Read it once, and never use it unless you need to keep BI in line."

Jem looked him in the eye. "Did Mr. Jessup start that fire?"

Mr. Carwick laughed soundlessly. "Hell, no. He was at a church social with hundreds of witnesses. We made sure of that. Just one of the services that bound the marriage." He winked. "You take the ingredi-

ents for Buffo and put a couple of them together, then put a match to the mix—you have a regular bomb, James. It's very simple. Anyone could do it. Even you or I could, if we had enough at stake."

"Where were you that night, Mr. Carwick?"

"As always, James, I was acting in the best interests of the client." He turned and stared at the BI logo across the skyline. Jem rose, began to speak, then walked from the office.

Mr. Carwick called to him: "Read the file, Jem."

That night, Jem read the file.

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FICTION

Night of the Moon Goddess

by Martin Limón



Illustration by Dan Krocatin

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Outside the main gate of Osan Air Force Base the narrow lanes of Songtan-up wind off in three directions. Each alleyway is crammed with brightly painted signs touting the best in leather goods or the tastiest in beer or guarantees as to which bar offers the greatest prospects for romance. At night the place is lit up as brightly as the spangled posterior of an over-age stripper. In the morning it looks quiet and sad, especially when a low-lying mist crawls slowly through the damp cobbled streets.

"How we ever going to find this joint?" Ernie said.

I pulled the note I had made out of my pocket. "Kim's Tailor Shop and Brassware. It should be easy. I even got the address."

Ernie snorted. "Addresses don't mean nothing in this mess."

It turned out that he was right. It wasn't so easy. Each little number hand-brushed in white paint over a doorway was covered with tote bags and running shoes and jogging outfits hanging from every available rafter. While we were searching, an old woman approached us and offered herself as a guide to that particular nirvana that all young GI's seek. I shooed her away and held Ernie back, reminding him that

we had a job to do. He stared straight ahead and chomped more viciously on his clicking wad of gum.

My name is George Sueño. My partner Ernie Bascom and I are agents for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th United States Army in Korea. Our first sergeant had assigned us to this case, and we'd jumped at it because it gave us a chance to get out of Seoul for a while. Osan is the largest U.S. air base in the country, situated about thirty miles south of the capital city of Seoul and about fifty miles from the Demilitarized Zone that slashes like a knife through the heart of the Korean Peninsula.

We were on what's called a "SOFA case," a claim made against the U.S. government by Korean civilians under a treaty known as the Status of Forces Agreement. A young woman, Miss Won Hei-suk, had committed suicide. The family contended that she had been driven to it by an American serviceman who had taken advantage of her youth and gullibility and promised her—among other things—marriage. The monetary figure they came up with included not only her projected productivity and value to the family in the future but also the price of their emotional

suffering. How they figured that one I didn't know.

The U.S. Army pays out millions of dollars in claims each year. In Germany it might be the price of an apple tree mowed down by a tank on maneuvers, in the Philippines income lost from rice churned up by the navy construction battalions. In Korea, it's the loss of a daughter.

Of course, the army didn't want to pay, so it was our job to find out if the story of this sordid little love affair was valid or bogus. Miss Won's family register had been submitted to 8th Army along with the claim, and it proved that she was clearly underage. One way out for the military was to find the GI, court-martial him for statutory rape, and force him to pay the claim. But finding him could be a problem. Not only were there a couple of thousand airmen stationed on Osan itself but the place was also a popular vacation spot for Marines from Okinawa and Japan. They caught military flights over here—at government expense—and they stayed in billeting facilities on post for four or five dollars a day. While here, they shopped for the cheap brassware and leather goods and textile products that the village offered in abundance and shipped tons of the junk back

to the States through the post office on base. They also enjoyed the more ephemeral charms of Songtan-up, when the sun went down and the neon began to sparkle.

We found Kim's Tailor Shop and Brassware in a side alley. The sign was painted in English with the small Korean translation below it. The back walls were hung with drapes of gray and blue material. The front of the shop was lined with brass vases, urns, and sculptures, the most prominent of which was a row of fists displaying a stiff upward-thrust index finger.

When we walked in, a man rose from a small leather sofa.

"Welcome," he said. "If you want suits, Kim's Tailor number one in Songtan Village."

He was a sturdy looking Korean man, a few years older than us, maybe thirty, with short cropped black hair brushed neatly back along the geometric lines of his big square head. His leathery brown face was trying to smile, but it couldn't get past the lines of concern folded just beneath his eyes. When I pulled out my badge, he sighed and deflated slightly, as if he had been expecting cops rather than customers.

"Are you Mr. Kim?"

"Yes. I'm Mr. Kim. I already tell everything to Korean police."

He plopped back down on the sofa and folded his short, bulging forearms across his knees. I sat down in a wooden chair across from him. Ernie wandered around the shop, running his fingers lightly over the contours of a brass female nude.

"The Korean police didn't find out much," I said. "Not even the name of the GI."

"Sure. I show them."

He reached across the coffee table, grabbed a large dogeared book covered with red card-board, and thumbed through the onionskin entries. After flicking the pages back and forth for a few seconds he jabbed a stubby finger at one of the receipts and turned it towards me.

"Here. These are the names."

"There were more than one?"

"Sure. GI never come from Okinawa alone. They all come in here buy some brassware. Two of them bought suits."

I stared at him for a moment.

"Only one of them went out with Miss Won," he said. "This guy here. The Cheap Charley."

"He's the one who didn't buy a suit?"

"Yes."

The names were scribbled in *hanqul*, the Korean script, and I sounded them out haltingly.

"Tom-son. Jo-dan. Pok-no."

"That's him. Pok-no. He's the one who went out with Miss Won."

The first two names were easy enough—Thompson and Jordan—although there must be a few hundred Marines on Okinawa with those last names. The last name, Pok-no, I couldn't figure. Mr. Kim had no idea how to spell it in English.

Could it be phony? It didn't seem likely that he would have passed off a false name with his buddies hanging around. Unless they were all in on some sort of plan. I figured it was more of a translation problem than anything else. Some of the sounds of English don't work all that well in Korean.

Mr. Kim offered us cigarettes. I refused, as did Ernie. He wrinkled his eyes shut as he lit up, and with the free side of his mouth he started to talk.

"They were three happy GIs, always talk too much and play around, and they made Miss Won laugh. I told her not to go out with GI. I told her many times, but you know young girl. They no listen nobody."

"Had she been out with GI's before?"

"No. He first one. Maybe I should've fired her." He blew a smoke ring towards the wall-papered ceiling. "If I told her I

fire her, then maybe she don't go out with GI. She was a good girl. Send all her money home to her family."

"What was her job here?"

"Help with receipts, clean up shop, wrap orders for GI's who want to mail things back State-side. Not much. Everything I can do myself, but shop must have flower if shop want to bring in many bees."

Attractive young women are an expendable quantity in Korea. Their main job is to work in factories or shops and save money for a dowry so they can get married. A woman doesn't get any real status until she's old and has a slew of grandchildren running around.

"How often did she go out with Pok-no?"

"Only once."

"Once?"

"Yes. He was here from Okinawa for only a few days, but every day he come here and talk to Miss Won and after second day I let him take her to lunch. On third day he took her to dinner, but she come back after eat to work night shift."

"What time did she get off?"

Kim's eyes widened.

"She don't get off. After work she sleep here. Someone must protect shop from slickey boys. Me, I go home."

"But you said she only went out with Pok-no once."

"I wasn't counting lunch or dinner. I give her one day vacation each month. She was like little girl, very excited each time her day off come. She always go to country to visit her parents or to visit her sister at temple. She's a..." He snapped his fingers. "What you say?"

He said the word in Korean, but I didn't know it either. We looked it up in his Korean-English dictionary.

"*Suknyo*," he said.

"Nun," I said.

It wasn't vocabulary that was often used in Songtan-up.

Ernie quit fiddling with the brassware, grabbed a folding chair, straddled it facing towards the back, and leaned forward at Mr. Kim.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "On their one date this Miss Won takes some Marine from Okinawa with her to her family in the countryside or to visit her sister who is a nun and then she comes back here the next day alone and that night kills herself?"

"Yes." Mr. Kim nodded somberly. "She worked all day and that night. After I left, she locked up the shop and went out."

"And the next morning the police found her body on the railroad tracks." Ernie leaned back on his chair.

Kim nodded and smoke drifted out of his nostrils toward the soot-stained paper above.

Before we left, I got an address, and Ernie bought one of the brass fists. Kim wrapped it up awkwardly with the paper wadded too tightly around the hard, pugnacious digit.

The jeep purred along the ribbon of asphalt that wound through the acres of wavering green rice paddies. Straw-hatted farmers, their pantslegs rolled up past their knees, bobbed through rows of sprouting shoots. Long-billed white cranes lifted gently from the muck and mire and flapped serenely into an endless blue sky.

"Don't they have any bars out here?" Ernie said.

"Not for GI's," I said. "Besides, you're driving."

"I won't be for long if I don't get a cool one."

After we slowed to read the signs at a crossroads, I motioned for him to turn right, and three kilometers later the village of Chunhua loomed ahead of us. The cluster of straw-thatched huts sat on a rocky promontory like a crown of thorns amidst the spreading wet fields.

Ernie jammed the jeep into low as we chugged up the one

dirt road that led into the village. Pantless toddlers and flapping-wing chickens scurried out of our way. We stopped in the center of the cluster of huts and got out of the jeep. Old men in hemp cloth tunics and women cowed in white linen stared at us curiously.

As I turned my back on the dying roar of the engine, I felt for a moment as if we'd stepped back in time. Bright eyes peered at us from within mud brick walls. Then I saw a rusty old Coca-Cola sign, and I snapped out of it. I flashed my badge to the proprietor of the open-stalled store and told him who I was looking for, and he yelled at a boy who went scurrying off towards the fields. While we waited by the jeep, a crowd of children too young for school surrounded us, and Ernie horsed around with them and broke apart his last few sticks of gum trying to make sure that no one was left out.

A thick-legged man trudged up the hill, his dark face hidden between his straw cap and his broad shoulders. He approached and spoke to me in Korean.

"I am Won Man-yuk. Hei-suk's father."

He nodded but kept his grip on the short scythe in his right hand and made no motion for us to move towards his home or

out of the sun. If he could be direct, so could I.

"We are here to find out why your daughter killed herself."

"The lawyer said he took care of all that."

"He is taking half of what you receive for his troubles, is he not?"

"We are farmers. If it wasn't for him, we'd get nothing."

"Maybe your daughter killed herself for some other reason. Not because of the American."

"She was a happy girl. She would never have killed herself if she hadn't gotten involved with foreigners. It was our mistake for letting her work in the city. But we have the children. Other mouths to feed."

"Did she ever bring the American here?"

"She didn't ask."

"Would you have allowed it if she had?"

"No."

"She had only known the American for a few days. During that time you never saw her—or saw him. You have no way of knowing why she killed herself."

"It had to be that. There could be no other reason."

"The claim is for a lot of money. Would you move away from Chunhua?"

"No. I would buy more land."

"Does your oldest daughter also send you money?"

His face hardened. "Don't speak of my oldest daughter. She wastes her life as a hermit on White Cloud Mountain, tending to some old temple that no one ever visits."

His knuckles bulged around the hilt of the scythe. I took a half step backwards. Ernie moved around the jeep, but I waved him off.

"We believe that Hei-suk spent her last day with your oldest daughter."

"Then she wasted her last day of life. Better if I'd kept them both in the fields."

His dark face turned up at me, and in the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat, his black eyes burned like fire in a pit. The cracked flesh of the cheeks quavered and for a moment I thought it would break, but then his face set itself back into stone, like the granite outcroppings that form the foundations of the ancient village of Chunhua.

I didn't know what else to ask him, and I wondered why we had even bothered to come. A claim like this was a family's only chance to pull themselves out of poverty, and they'd try to get it no matter what the facts of the case. Still, I had a job to do.

As gently as I could, I nodded and thanked him. We got into the jeep and rode away, the

crowd of children scurrying after us and the sturdy old farmer standing like a rock amidst the swirling dust.

The steep cobbled lanes of the village of Ok-dong had been carefully washed and festooned with bright blossoms and hanging paper lanterns in anticipation of the coming Festival of the Spring Flower. The aroma of boiling beef and onions wafted out of open-fronted noodle shops. Freshly scrubbed, lacquered wooden tables of *soju* houses that serve rice wine beckoned with their smiling, silk-bedecked hostesses and the warbling sounds of female crooners crackling out of small wooden speakers.

"This place ain't half bad," Ernie said.

"Maybe we can stop on the way back," I said, "but first we've got to climb halfway up White Cloud Mountain."

We had stopped at the police station, and they told us that a Taoist nun by the name of Won Un-suk did indeed live on the mountain. Her official occupation was listed as the tender of the Temple of the Jade Emperor.

The crisp-suited young police officer could barely contain his mirth when we asked about her. Most of the inhabitants of Ok-dong considered her eccen-

tric at best, but they tolerated her because her little temple sometimes caught the overflow of tourists who came to Ok-dong to visit the much larger Buddhist temple farther up the mountain.

"Did you see the American who visited here last week?" I asked.

"Of course. We always notice such things. Now some more Americans only a few days later. Ok-dong is becoming an international attraction."

I got the directions to the nun's hooch, and we walked out of the station.

"Real wise-ass," Ernie said.

"Everybody's gotta have some fun."

As we climbed up the steep mountain path, the chatter and the clanging of pots in the village of Ok-dong below gradually gave way to the rustling of wind through pine trees and the scurrying of squirrels through brush.

Ernie wiped the first beads of sweat from his brow.

"Why don't we just write up the report that it was a suicide brought on by statutory rape and let that farmer have his claim? Why go to all this trouble?"

"I want him to have the claim, too. But remember, there's a Marine who could get burned."

"He deserves it, going after the innocent stuff when there's all those business girls in Songtan willing to give him what he wants for a few bucks."

"Besides," I said, "this case doesn't seem right. Why would she take it so hard so quickly? For all we know, he hadn't even left Korea when she killed herself."

"Eyewitnesses say she walked onto the tracks and nobody else was around."

"So it wasn't murder. Still, before you kill yourself, you at least brood about it for a while."

"How do you know?"

"Some of us brood all our lives and never work up the courage."

"Jesus," Ernie said. "We really do need to stop in one of those *soju* houses. If the rice wine doesn't perk you up, I know the girls will."

"All right. On the way back. I promise."

At a bend in the pathway a sign pointed up towards a plateau above the pines. We followed it, and when we crested the ridge, we came upon a small wooden hut surrounded by a carefully tended garden of sprouting turnips. I shouted as we approached.

"Yoboseiyo! Won Un-suk keiseiyo?"

A tall, thin Korean woman with a scraggly bobbed hairdo and loose blue cotton skirt and tunic emerged from the hut. Her full lips worked hard to cover her big front teeth but slid back into a broad grin when she saw us. Her eyes sparkled, and she seemed to be having trouble keeping from breaking into a laugh. I saw the resemblance to the stern farmer we had met at the village of Chunhua, but she was like an inverted image of him, one that saw the gaiety of life rather than just its grimness.

"Are you Won Un-suk?"

She nodded. I showed her my badge, but she waved it away, still smiling up at us.

"You're here about my sister," she said.

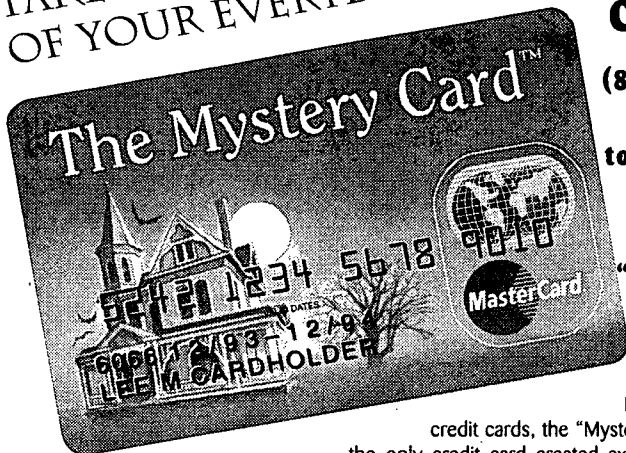
"Yes."

"Come in. Come in."

The floor of her little hut was immaculately clean and covered with a smooth thick layer of oil paper. We took off our shoes and entered and sat down crosslegged while she happily buzzed about preparing some Black Dragon tea. A brass pot of water was already hot, as if she had been expecting visitors. As she worked, she talked.

"My sister came here to visit me on her last day of life." She turned and flashed a quick, toothy smile at us. "For this I am very pleased. With her she

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brought an American. He had less hair than you do and was very lean and strong. My sister, I think, was in love with this man, which is a very happy thing but also a very dangerous thing. Don't you agree?"

I nodded. Ernie just stared at her, slightly dumbfounded by her bright manner, although he couldn't understand the rapid Korean that she spoke.

She unfolded the legs of a small oak table, set it in front of our knees, and poured us cups of warm tea. I didn't bother to interrupt her. She seemed happy to have visitors and happy to talk about her sister.

"Many people visit me. The Temple of the Jade Emperor is very popular. Of course, sometimes people expect something a little more elaborate."

She waved to a small hand-carved shrine in the corner. In it sat a small statuette made of jade. A somber old gentleman in thick robes, his eyes closed, was apparently meditating.

"The Jade Emperor. What you Americans would call the god of the universe. Of course we Taoists realize that even the gods are subject to the whims of the Tao."

She flashed another of her gleaming smiles.

I noticed another shrine on the opposite wall. Made of in-laid stones, it was a type of mo-

saic of a beautiful woman floating above the clouds, her long silken garments trailing gracefully behind her. The nun continued her monologue.

"They stayed for a while and had tea. My sister was very proud of her young man." She smiled again. "Pride is a very dangerous thing, don't you agree? After tea they left because he was anxious to get down to all the excitement of Ok-dong. She was very disappointed by this because we don't get to visit too often and of course we will get to visit even less often now."

I began to understand why the young policeman in Ok-dong found it so humorous that a couple of American investigators were planning to visit this hermit of White Cloud Mountain. She turned her smiling eyes on Ernie, who wasn't paying any attention to her chatter but merely sipped contentedly on his tea. She looked at me.

"He is a student of the Tao."

I glanced at him. "Yes. I think he is."

Ernie looked up, realizing we were talking about him, but turned back to his tea.

"A very advanced student," the nun said. For once her face turned solemn and she nodded slowly. Her smile returned.

"You must be wondering why my sister would kill herself. Of

course, the answer is obvious. Love with a man will only lead to pain, and the sooner you get the pain over with, the sooner you will be able to resume your journey towards the eternal principles of the Tao. The great sage Lao-tze would have nothing to do with love, he was much beyond that, and eventually he found the Jade Elixir of Immortality."

She thrust her finger into the air and waved it like a baton, her wide mouth sparkling below.

Ernie set down his tea and stared at her. "Don't you give a damn that your sister's dead?"

She turned to me, puzzled. I translated. She smiled back at Ernie. "She's much better off now. She escaped the illusion of love. Quite an accomplishment in one so young."

Ernie swiveled his head. "What'd she say?"

"Never mind, Ernie. This broad's crazy. I'll just ask one more question and we'll get out of here and get down to that *soju* house."

"Good idea."

I turned back to the nun and spoke again in Korean. "When did you last see your sister?"

"When she walked down the mountain with the American."

I nodded. "Thanks for the tea." I pulled out some Korean money, a thousand won note,

and slid it under the teapot. Laughing, she pushed it back at me.

"Oh no. Only devotees have to make contributions. You came as guests. This isn't necessary."

I picked up the wrinkled bill and shoved it back into my pocket. On the way across the turnip garden she smiled and bowed to us like a woodpecker after termites.

We went back to the *soju* house in the center of Ok-dong, and soon a bevy of giggling hostesses were sitting around us. "We had another American here," one of them said, "just a few days ago."

"Did he have short hair?" I asked. They nodded. "And a Korean woman with him?" They nodded again.

"She got very upset and left after only about an hour."

"He stayed here alone?"

"Not alone!" They all laughed at this. "He had us to keep him company."

"He spent the whole night?"

"Not the whole night. After a while he left with the Moon Goddess!"

I asked her what she meant by that, but they all giggled and Ernie was horsing around with the other girls and making them laugh and somebody

turned the music up louder so I couldn't talk anyway. After a few more shots of rice wine I figured it must be one of those obscure Korean literary allusions and I started to forget about the investigation. It was clear what had happened. The boyfriend, like any red-blooded Marine, had forgotten his little girlfriend from Songtan when he'd encountered the beautiful courtesans of White Cloud Mountain. She had lost much face and left on her own. Maybe she was crazy, like her sister, or intense to the point of madness, like her father. For whatever reason, she couldn't take her first rejection, and she returned to Songtan and did her job like the well-trained child of Confucius that she was, and when the night closed around her, she went to the railroad tracks and waited for the train and walked out in front of the whistle and the clanging and the barreling light.

I tried to put these thoughts out of my mind and laugh along with Ernie and all the girls. At first I couldn't, but after a few more shots of *soju* I managed.

One of the girls slipped something into my hand. It was a temporary ration card issued by the Osan Ration Control Office. She pouted.

"He said he would give me more money later, when he

comes back, and he gave me this." The temporary card was only good for a month, and on his next trip to Korea he'd easily be able to get another. I shook my head.

"It's not worth much."

She sighed. "You keep it then. Are all GI's big liars?"

I nodded somberly and put the card in my pocket. The name on it was typed neatly. Faulkner, Robert R.

Korean has no letter for *f*, so a hard *p* is usually substituted. The letters *l* and *r* are interchangeable and sometimes dropped. "Pok-no" was a reasonably good translation of the name Faulkner.

More food and more rice wine were brought out. Korean men entered the shop, and some of the girls drifted off towards them. Everyone seemed quite happy to see Americans in such an out of the way place, as if we confirmed that White Cloud Mountain was a spot well worth visiting. The night turned out to be a great success, Ernie was in a rage of blissfulness, and the ladies of Ok-dong were all that they ever promised they'd be.

We didn't leave until the morning.

At the Osan provost marshal's office the next day we got the teletype operator to

transmit a message to Iwakuni Air Force Base in Okinawa with the names of the three Marines. While we waited for the response, we went to the snack bar and loaded up on fried eggs and bacon and hash-browns.

"Could you believe those chicks last night?" Ernie said.

"They've never talked to Americans before," I said. "We were a novelty."

"Damn. If I'd been any more of a novelty, they would've killed me." He sipped on his coffee. "So we recommend approval of the claim, huh?"

"I don't see why not. Another case of a GI's gonads guiding his common sense."

"Understandable."

"Yeah."

After breakfast, we still had more time to kill, so we stopped at the base library. I found a book on Taoist cosmology and found out that the Jade Emperor was indeed considered to be the supreme god of the universe. His powers were somewhat limited, however, since the Tao itself, the inexplicable principles that rule existence, cannot be broken but only followed, even by gods of immense power.

Hsi-wang-mo, the Goddess of the Moon and the dispenser of the elixir of immortality, was a little more to my liking. A

beautiful woman, she was changeable like the moon itself, and as such she was the goddess of the seasons and the weather and of all things that were always in flux—which seemed like everything to me. An engraving in the book looked much like the second shrine we had seen in the little hut on White Cloud Mountain.

In a book on Korean rhetoric, I couldn't find any reference to a saying like "leaving with the Moon Goddess." I asked the Korean librarian, but she had never heard of it. I wrote it off as just the mutterings of a bunch of party girls.

When we went back to the Osan PMO, the transmission was waiting for us. Jordan and Thompson had been located easily. The problem was that Lance Corporal Robert R. Faulkner had not yet returned to Okinawa and was being carried by his unit as absent without leave. They told us that if we found him we should arrest him—and send him back under armed guard.

The evidence was too thin to involve the Korean police, so Ernie and I strode resolutely past the police box through the main street of Ok-dong without stopping and, even though the shadows of the pines were

growing longer, hiked up the side of White Cloud Mountain.

When we crossed the crest that led to the Temple of the Jade Emperor, I shouted, but no one emerged from the rickety hut. We checked inside. Empty.

Ernie kicked around in the turnip patch until he came upon a rectangular clump of fresh black soil. He searched behind the hut and found a shovel, and we started to dig.

The Temple of the Jade Emperor was also a shrine to the Moon Goddess, and it wasn't too surprising that the girls of the Ok-dong *soju* house called the crazy woman who tended the shrine the Moon Goddess. After her humiliation, it was only natural that Miss Won would've returned up here to her sister's hut and told her about the betrayal by her American boyfriend.

Won Un-suk had told us that after her sister left with her boyfriend that night she had never seen her again. Maybe she was lying. Or maybe she meant it in a spiritual sense: she had never again seen the innocent person who had once been her sister.

The concerned nun might've gone into the village herself to talk to the wayward young man. Had she brought him back up here? Maybe they'd

talked. What had happened then I didn't know, but I did know that Faulkner had never made it back to Osan in time to catch a flight to Okinawa.

The jolt in Ernie's shovel answered the question.

We bent down and scraped away the dirt. As flesh came into view, we did our best to hold our breath to protect ourselves from the rotten odor.

We cleared away more of the earth. In the fading light of sunset his skin seemed to have a green pallor, but it was the stomach that startled us most. Ernie jumped back, and we peered down into the pit.

"Looks like he swallowed a goddamned bowling ball," Ernie said. "I've never seen a stomach so distended."

"What could it have been?"

"I don't have any idea."

We threw a couple of feet of dirt back on top of the body and went into the hut to wait. Ernie watched out the window on one side, I watched out the other. Three hours later large black clouds rolled in but scurried away, as if anxious to get out of the neighborhood.

“I’m not going to sit up here all night,” Ernie said. “What we do is we go back down the mountain, report it,

get a team up here to exhume the body, and we're through."

"Yeah. But she might slip away."

"She's already gone."

I sighed. "You're probably right."

We got up and walked outside the hut. Another cloud rolled away and the face of the full moon glimmered down on the turnip patch.

"The Moon Goddess is watching," I said.

"Knock that crap off," Ernie said.

We started down the path.

At the first bend in the trail the moonlight lit up a granite cliff in front of us almost as brightly as the white screen of a drive-in movie. I hadn't noticed it on the way up because our backs were to it, and in the light of day it would just be another rock. Something darted across the cliff. I grabbed Ernie's arm.

"Look! Up there. On a ledge on the granite cliff."

Ernie squinted.

"I'll be damned."

"It looks like her."

"Yeah."

We scrambled towards the cliff and found a pathway leading up. Soon we were climbing above the pines. The moonlight beat down on us, and with the reflection off the smooth granite the sky around us seemed

almost as bright as day. The valley below crouched like some dark creature.

The ledge narrowed, and when we rounded a corner, we saw her, sitting atop a large boulder that leaned out into the open air above the abyss.

"Welcome," she said, "to the realm of the Goddess of the Moon."

She waved her hand at us.

"No. Don't come any closer. You will be severely punished if you do." She held a jade tumbler no larger than a small wine carafe up into the moonlight. "I will deny you the Elixir of Immortality."

She lowered the tumbler into her lap and laughed softly to herself.

"It's the same formula Lao-tze took before passing beyond the Gates of the Western Mountains into the land of the immortals. It has taken me years to perfect it. I wanted my sister to take it but she was of small mind, so instead I challenged her boyfriend, the young American, to try it. He was very bold. Or maybe it was the rice wine he had consumed with the brazen ladies of Ok-dong. But whatever the reason, he grabbed it out of my hand and poured it straight down his throat."

She lowered her eyes. "I suppose he wasn't ready for it." She

looked back up and laughed. "To follow the path of the Tao takes years of preparation. I saw you consulting with him in the turnip patch. I'm afraid he's not too talkative now. My sister couldn't get him to say a word, and when she couldn't, she seemed frightened of him and ran away down the mountain. I was happy when I learned that she had found a way of transcending her troubles. Maybe she was, after all, wiser than I thought."

She held the tumbler out towards Ernie.

"Will you have some? You seem like one who is wise enough in the ways of the Tao to sample the Jade Elixir. You will have immortality! No? No matter."

She raised the tumbler high above her head.

"To the Goddess of the Moon!"

As she opened her mouth and started to pour I ran forward, but the boulder was slippery and my leather shoes found no traction. Ernie was behind me and cupped his hands for my feet, and I slid up and over the curved surface. As I reached for her, she poured the last of the green fluid into her mouth. A violent eruption convulsed her

stomach. I expected vomit to explode out of her mouth but instead she seemed to choke, and then she dropped the tumbler and clenched her throat and the jade container clattered along the side of the cliff until it crashed into the rocks below.

Ernie pushed again, but this time I found a handhold and resisted. I didn't want to go sliding over the far edge of the rock.

The nun stood and looked down at me, her face green, her throat shriveled up like a dried stick of bamboo, her eyes wide in terror. A croaking noise erupted from her open mouth, and she stepped backwards and her foot slipped. As I reached out, her hand slapped mine and slid off my fingers, and she vaulted into the black night, twirling end over end until her skull smashed into the rocks below, cracking like a moist melon.

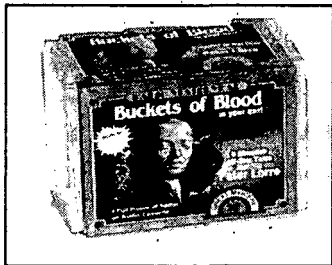
I lay still, clinging to the rock for a long time until Ernie pulled me off the precipice.

On the way back to Ok-dong long clouds skittered in front of the silver face of the moon, wavering in the wind, like silk streamers trailing after the Moon Goddess.

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FICTION

WAIF OF THE WINDS

by Jim
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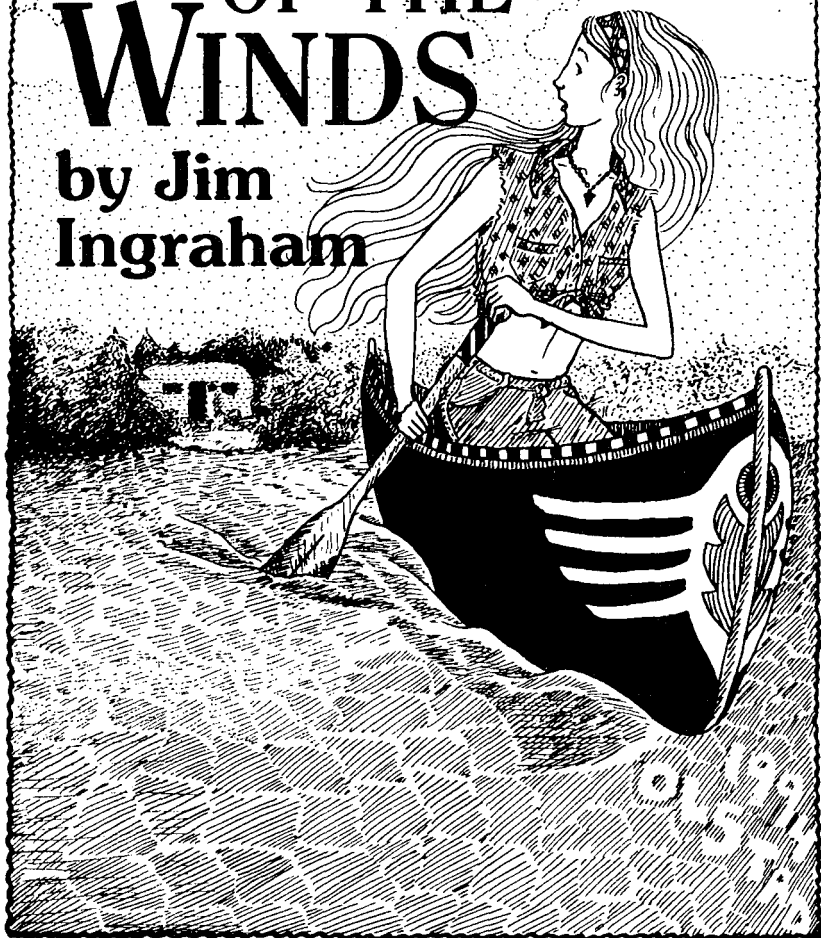


Illustration by Pat Olstad

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Amy Larsson was sitting at the end of the table in the Interrogation Room, a pretty, blonde, eighteen-year-old deaf girl who had not learned to speak, her face impossibly serene because of her affliction, staring out the window while Sergeant Dunn of the Lee County Sheriff's Department here in Florida sat next to me, amusing himself with a common abuse of my name.

"Miz Givings," he said and smiled, and I deadpanned him as I do anyone who trots out that old porker. My name is Barbara Givings, and I'm an investigator for the district attorney. I was asked to come to the sheriff's station not because of an official connection with the case or because I had worked with Amy in the past but because I was one of the few people available who could sign. I was probably the last person Sergeant Dunn wanted as an interpreter.

"I don't suppose she murdered the man," he conceded grudgingly, "but she sure as hell didn't go out there to warn him."

"And why don't you think she murdered him?" I was curious. He usually piled on the accusations. Because of his yellow hair, now turning gray, and his sour disposition, he was

known locally as the "Golden Meanie" (without reference to Aristotle, I'm sure).

"Because there was no blood on her when she got out of that canoe," he said. "And the victim was spattered with blood."

I had known Amy since the old days when I was with Juvenile Court. She had been abandoned in infancy by an alcoholic mother and had been institutionalized most of her life. It was I who had found a caring foster home for her here in the village after she had been booted out of school for beating up a gym teacher who denied having molested her in a shower stall.

"But damn it, the man's blind!" Dunn said, pounding the table with a stiff finger, the same finger he had moments ago been picking his nose with. "How could a deaf and dumb girl communicate with a blind man? Think about it, Miz Givings," grinding my name out through crooked yellowed teeth. (I don't think he recognized the pun; he had heard someone else call me Miz Givings and knew it annoyed me.)

"She couldn't yell at him," he said, "couldn't make gestures, couldn't write him notes or call on the telephone. She'd know she couldn't get through to him, so why would she go over

there, knowing he was alone, except to rob him?"

"Is it that difficult for you to believe she might have wanted to help him? She didn't think about the problem until she got there." Caught myself yelling and that embarrassed me.

I dropped the flat of my hand on the table, knowing the vibrations would get Amy's attention. Her blue eyes locked on me as I signed a question.

"I've already told you," she said, annoyed, I suppose, at being held at a police station, maybe bored just sitting there staring out a window, angered, I imagine, because her effort to help the blind man was unappreciated. Like the rest of us, she wanted recognition and seldom got it.

I was told she liked me, not because I had learned to sign but because I treated her deafness as a communication problem, not as an affliction. To me she was a bright young woman who hadn't yet come to terms with a society that thought patronizing her was a kindness.

"Tell me again, Amy."

She rolled her eyes, made all kinds of angry faces, then, for the third time, told me that around nine o'clock that morning her friend Irving Mitchell rode up to her place on his bicycle and told her he had overheard a man at the animal

clinic where he works tell someone on the phone that Mr. Gerald Webster's seeing-eye dog was at the clinic and that the old blind man was alone in his trailer.

"So why didn't this Irving Mitchell go over there and warn him himself?" Dunn asked.

"As you well know, it's more than a mile away by the road, and he had only his bicycle and had to get back to work."

The blind man's trailer was on the southern tip of a narrow peninsula that was just a few hundred yards across a boat canal from the sheriff's station. To get there by road, you had to go to the other end of our village and cross a causeway. To get there by boat took only a few minutes.

Dunn asked, "So why didn't this Mitchell come to us?"

"Said he didn't think you'd follow up on it."

"And he knows how to talk with his fingers?"

"His mother is deaf. That's how he and Amy became friends."

"So when we brought her in for questioning, why didn't she answer our note? She can write, can't she?"

"She's deaf, sergeant. She's not stupid."

I signed the question to Amy.

"Afraid you wouldn't believe her." It wasn't what she had said, but if I had quoted her exactly, he might have leaped across the table and strangled her. She was no diplomat.

"I still don't think she went there to warn anybody. Why would she do that?"

"Because she cares about people," I said.

According to Amy's story, she got to Mr. Webster's front door before the thieves got there, but she couldn't communicate. He just stood in the open doorway letting her tug on his hand, but suddenly he jerked his hand free and slammed the door. Next thing she knew she was on the ground, his door was wide open, and he was flat on the floor in there with a bloodied head.

"I suggest," I said, "that instead of sitting here arguing, we take her over there and run through it in detail."

He resented my having made a reasonable suggestion that gave him no choice but to comply. He sat for almost a minute glowering down the table at Amy. I wouldn't say he had fixed a hate on her, but he wasn't taking kindly to her obvious lack of respect for him. I think it was her manner, her aggressive free spirit. To snowbirds and locals alike she was known as the Waif of the

Winds. Don't ask me who invented the name. Some wanderer from up north, probably. She liked to run, and we'd often see her racing down the beach, blonde hair trailing after her. My favorite image of her was in her canoe—tall, straight as an Indian, strong arms pulling the blade through the water.

She was in the front seat of my car as we lumbered down the gravel road on the peninsula. Dunn leaned in from the back seat to remind me (and thank God Amy couldn't hear it) that she had a record of petty larceny.

"Two years ago," I said. "Two cans of soup from a Winn Dixie. That doesn't make her a thief. It was before the system found a shelter for her. The poor girl was hungry."

"Nevertheless, she's a thief," he said. "And all your liberal garbage can't erase that, Miz Givings."

Gerald Webster's mobile home was on a broad gravel lot screened from the village by a thick tangle of mangroves, screened from houses farther up the peninsula by a hedge of sea grape trees. It was isolated on the southern tip of the peninsula, an ideal target for thieves. No place for a blind man, but he had lived there when he was sighted and had

inherited the property when the north end of the peninsula was just a long strip of undeveloped marsh, not the site of big expensive houses it had become.

When we got to Webster's land, there were crime scene technicians tiptoeing around the gravel with clipboards and cameras and tape measures, feet noisily crunching broken shells that were sprinkled around the trailer entrance.

"Find anything?" I asked the fingerprint man, Roger Usher, who was kneeling at the stove inside the trailer.

"Too much," he said. "Whoever looked after this place didn't do much scrubbing. Prints all over everything."

The body had been removed, and Agent Morrison, in charge of the investigation, said the instrument of death was a cement brick.

"Blood and hair on it," he said. "Tossed over there in the weeds."

"Think it could've been used against Amy as well as Mr. Webster?"

"If you believe her story," he said, looking doubtfully at my car where Amy was sitting, afraid to get out. For a moment sunlight glanced off a scar on his lip, reminding me of seeing him carried to an ambulance two years ago, his face

twitching in pain, covered with soot and blood. He had just broken into a burning shack and rescued two little girls who'd been locked inside by a drunken father. It was how he got promoted to detective, called "agents" here in Lee County. Damned if I know why.

"You get a story out of her?" he asked.

I told him what she had told me.

"Well, let's get her over here and run through it," he said, voicing the same objection Dunn had voiced—that she ought to have known she couldn't warn a blind man.

After some arguing, Amy got out of the car, but she wouldn't come closer to the trailer than thirty feet. Stood there on wornout sneakers and long tanned legs, reluctance all over her.

"What the hell's she afraid of if she didn't do anything?" Dunn said. "Or is that showing my prejudice, Miz Givings?"

As I looked at him in disgust, he gave Morrison a glance sarcastically critical of me, which I ignored.

"Why don't they believe me?" Amy said. Not much missed her bright eyes. I wasn't about to tell her that some cops have long memories and that Dunn suspected her of coming to the peninsula to salvage something

from the robbery. So far she thought she was just a witness.

She told her story to Morrison, beginning with Irving's warning, repeating what I'd already heard.

"She came up to the front door and pounded on it?" he asked, patiently waiting for the interpretation.

I signed the question. Amy nodded. "And he opened it," she said. She was signing a little too fast for me, but I was able to get the gist of it. "I put his hand on my ear," she said, "and shook my head. I put his hand on my mouth and tried to make a noise. I thought he understood. He let me tug on his hand. Then suddenly his face changed, and he stepped back inside and slammed the door."

"And then what?" Morrison asked, looking at her.

I signaled Amy to go on. "Well, something must've hit me," she said. "All I remember is getting up off the ground. There was a painful lump on my head. The door was open and I started to go inside and saw that blood—"

She put her hand over her eyes and turned her face away.

Both men seemed uncomfortable watching her walk across the gravel, apparently weeping.

Morrison asked, "Did she go inside?"

I put my arm around Amy and walked with her toward my car. After a while I signed the question.

She shook her head. We talked a few minutes after she got into the car, sitting there looking sadly at her hands, blaming herself, I think, for not having been able to save the man.

"She ran to her canoe and came around the point there and went back to the village," I told Morrison.

"And ran from me when I caught up with her at the boat ramp," Dunn said. "If she was so damned anxious to help us, why did she run, Miz Givings?"

"Because you've never shown any kindness to her," I said.

All that got from him was a sarcastic smirk.

Morrison was looking questioningly at Dunn. He might have thought less of the man than I did, but he wouldn't show it. They were fellow deputies, and I, more or less, was on a different team. I liked Morrison, liked the way he handled himself, easy-going but thorough. And I liked his looks—a kind of Kevin Costner with more chin. Taller than Dunn and considerably brighter.

"Why were you at the marina?" Morrison asked Dunn.

"Like I told you, the call was relayed to me, some woman

said she saw someone on the point who didn't belong there. Said it was a girl heading for the village in a canoe."

"Why'd you respond to that? The woman accuse her of anything?"

"I didn't get the call, but I don't think so. I just happened to be there. I saw the canoe, recognized the Waif, and waited."

"And then what?"

"I was notified that another call came to the dispatcher saying there was a murder."

"Same voice as called earlier?"

"Have no idea," Dunn said.

"And the dispatcher didn't get a name, either time?"

"The woman hung up when she asked for one."

The three of us were walking over to where the roadway cut through the sea grape screen. I pointed out to Morrison a small pile of bricks. There was a sandy imprint on the pile where a brick had been removed.

"Looks like the source of your 'instrument of death,'" I told him.

We saw a house just up the road a couple of hundred feet—a large house, well landscaped, palms rising above a red-tiled roof. Like all the others on the road it looked expensive, especially in contrast to Webster's trailer.

"Any boat marks along the shore?" I asked Morrison.

"Over near the dock where the canoe was," he said, pointing. "Hard gravel over there, no clear footprints."

"If the Waif came here to warn Webster," Dunn said, "why didn't she land her canoe on the village side by those mangroves instead of going all the way around the other side?" He looked at Morrison as though expecting applause.

I went back to the car and asked Amy, came back and said she hadn't wanted to disturb the landcrabs that inhabit the mud near the mangroves.

Dunn rolled his eyes on that one. "You believe that?" His eyes gleefully asked Morrison the same question. Morrison ignored him.

I asked Morrison, "Were there any other boat marks along the shore?"

"Haven't found any. But the tide was rising. Could've wiped things out."

"Over there by the mangroves?"

"Some marks. Could be old. Hard to tell."

If thieves had come to the peninsula by boat, they would likely have landed south of the trailer, by the mangroves out of sight. To get into the trailer, they'd have had to come around to the north side where we

were. Even there they would have been hidden from the rest of the peninsula by the sea grape trees.

"While you're looking for the woman, I want to cover another part of this story," I said, intending to get Amy out of the way before Morrison or Dunn got some woman to point her out. Of course she'd say it was Amy if Amy was the only girl she could point at. Lot of blonde girls in South Florida wearing pony tails.

"I suppose you can get a ride back," I said to Dunn.

"Don't you worry about me, Miz Givings," he said.

Morrison, watching Dunn, frowned and shook his head.

For reasons I didn't yet understand, it was the geography of the place I believed held the key to the puzzle. So I tried to fix an image of it in my mind as though looking down on the peninsula from a helicopter.

It was like a finger. The gravel patch holding Webster's trailer was the fingernail—mangroves on the left side, a boat dock on the right. The sea grape hedge stretched side to side across the first knuckle, screening off the rest of the finger where the new houses were. The causeway was where the finger joined the hand.

I studied that image all the way across town until I pulled

into the lot behind the animal clinic.

I turned toward Amy, who was slouched in the seat staring out the window. I jostled her arm. "Did Irving hear that man say anything about robbing Mr. Webster?"

She shook her head.

I told her to stay in the car. I found Irving hosing the deck of a dog pen—a skinny, sixteen-year-old black boy wearing glasses, timid as a deer. We'd met before. Amy had introduced us when the judge put Amy temporarily in my custody. Irving was the one, the only one, outside the court waiting for her. I think he was the only boy she had ever let get close to her.

I noticed a man in a stained T-shirt watching from an old Ford truck at the end of the yard—an undersized head with dirty-looking brown hair and mistrustful eyes, a tattooed arm resting on the window frame.

"Don't look," I said to Irving. "But there's a man over there—"

"He's the one," Irving mumbled, head down like he was talking to his foot.

"Did he leave right after making the phone call?"

"Yes."

"Does he have a boat?"

"A rubber one. He keeps it down there by the fence."

"He have it in the back of the truck when he left here this morning?"

"I didn't notice," Irving said.

I thought I knew the man.

"His name Hixon?"

Scott Hixon was an ex-con I had helped put away three years ago. I had heard he was out on parole. I didn't know he was in our area. He had spent most of his adult years down in Everglades City.

"I think so," Irving said.

"Well, I know him, and he knows me," I said. "I'll go in the office so he won't think I came directly from you. But you're sure he was the one on the phone?"

"Don't say I told you," Irving said, turning his back to the man, giving a quick glance toward my car.

"I won't. Maybe you see Amy Larsson over there in my car. I don't want him seeing you signing to her. Just keep doing what you're doing. Don't even look at her."

I spent a few minutes inside the office asking how long Hixon had worked there and whether he'd been at work all morning. A round woman at a computer told me Hixon did landscape maintenance part-time. She thought he had left in midmorning and had come

back just before noon. She said he'd had a dental appointment.

"You checked on that?"

"Why bother?" she said. "If he ain't here, he don't get paid. I don't care where he goes."

When I got outside, Hixon was still in the truck. Irving was nowhere in sight. I motioned for Amy to come over.

As the two of us approached the truck, I said to Hixon, "This girl lost her dog over here. You see a stray anywhere around?"

"What'd it look like?" he said, directing the question at Amy. Nothing in his expression suggested that he recognized her or knew she was deaf.

"Little cocker spaniel," I said.

"Never seen it."

I didn't like the way he was looking at Amy—dirty little grin on his mouth, checking her out. I thanked him and got her away from there. When we were back in my car, I asked whether she'd ever seen him before. She shook her head. She had already told me she hadn't seen anyone around the trailer except the blind man.

"When you were crossing the canal, you see any boats close to the point?"

She shook her head.

We went back to the substation where I phoned Hixon's parole officer, remembering that Hixon had always worked with

a young conch from the keys named Roy De Soto.

"Know where I can find him?" I asked.

"You might try the Hirschberg flophouse on Back Street."

"They got a phone?"

"Not unless it was installed this morning."

"He still hang out with Hixon?"

"He'd better not—ex-cons, you know."

"You think there would be any connection between Hixon and people out near the village?"

"Absolutely. He works out there—odd jobs for those snow birds. Why you asking?"

"There's been a murder out there."

"You think he did it?"

"I think he's involved."

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Do I have to keep riding around with you?" Amy asked as we headed back toward the peninsula. I had checked at the substation: Morrison and Dunn were still out there.

"Not for much longer," I said.

"They think I did it, don't they?"

"I don't think so, Amy."

"Why do they look at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like I'm bad."

"They don't think you're bad. And I know you're not bad. What you did was the right thing."

When we got to the southern end of the peninsula, Agent Morrison was at the dock with Sergeant Dunn and an elderly couple Morrison said were Alexander Primm and his wife Hortense, who lived in the house just north of the sea grape hedge. It was Mrs. Primm, Morrison said, who had made the phone calls. He had extracted that admission from her after pointing out that the three houses north of her on the peninsula were unoccupied—snowbirds summering in the north. Apparently there was no other woman around who could have made the call.

Both Primm and his wife used all the gestures people who can't sign commonly make at Amy, grinning and nodding as though dealing with an infant or a nitwit.

But the friendliness vanished when Mrs. Primm turned her back on Amy. "I'm sure it was her," she said, face frozen in cold accusation, little hard wrinkles around her mouth. "I remember her when she worked at the supermarket. I remember that trouble she got

into. Stealing, wasn't it?" Little ferretlike conspirator, turned my stomach.

"Did you see her near the trailer?" I asked.

"No. I just saw her getting into her canoe. And it just seemed strange. I'd never seen her here before."

"Do you report every stranger you see on this peninsula?"

The eyes turned to stone, no longer interested in me.

Morrison asked, "So you came down to the trailer?"

"Yes, I wanted to look in on Mr. Webster. I thought something might have happened to him."

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. I just had a feeling. The way that girl looked."

"Did you know the dog was gone? You see a van come pick it up?"

She said no, but the question unnerved her.

"What did you do when you saw Mr. Webster?"

"I phoned 911."

"Why didn't you give the operator your name?"

"I don't know. Didn't want to get involved, I suppose."

"So you made two calls?"

She nodded.

"You didn't see anyone else down here?"

"No."

Mr. Primm, standing silently behind his wife, nodded at every word she said—a tall, whitehaired man in white pants and white-striped blue shirt and blue dock shoes. He was older than his wife, maybe in his middle sixties.

"I was on the other side of the house tending my garden," he said in a high, strangely nasal voice. Like a lot of men his age, he wore his pants hiked up, as though afraid the cuffs might get soiled.

"Your wife was with you?"

"No, I was on this side of the house," she said. "I had just got home from the store." She was standing slightly in front of her husband, several inches shorter but insistently the spokesperson of the two.

"You saw a girl getting into a canoe, and you went right inside and made the phone call?"

"It looked suspicious!"

"You mentioned it to your husband?"

She was looking at Morrison as though asking whether she had to continue putting up with my presence.

"I think I was upstairs taking a shower," Mr. Primm said.

"After you came in from the garden?"

He nodded, lowered his gaze, put his hands in his pockets. He looked clean enough. I suppose he could have just taken a

shower. But no smell of cologne or soap came off him.

"I couldn't find him," she said.

"Did you think maybe he was down here at the trailer?"

"Oh, he never—" she bit her lip, looked anxiously at Mr. Primm.

"He never comes down here?"

In a hesitant voice she said, "He doesn't like dogs."

"I was upstairs or out in the garden all this time," Mr. Primm said. "Is . . . is that a problem?"

"Just trying to understand what happened."

"Isn't it obvious?" He glanced over at Amy. "From what my wife says, the girl, running off the way she did—"

"I don't think that's what's obvious," I told him.

I tugged gently on Morrison's arm and led him along the sea grape hedge. Out of earshot I said, "Any contradictions between what they told you and what they just told me?"

"Not that I noticed."

"A little nervous, aren't they?"

He shrugged. "Talking to police . . ."

"Except for having a trailer on it, this is a nice piece of property," I said, looking around. "Joined to his, it would be worth a fortune, don't you think?"

He started laughing. "I've known you to reach quick conclusions," he said. "But this beats them all. Sure you're not just trying to steer this away from Amy?"

"You know damn well she didn't do it."

"All I know is I hope she didn't. But so far she's the only one seen around that trailer."

"According to the alleged witness. You believe her?"

He just smiled.

"Well, before you or that idiot Dunn scare her to death, I'm taking her home."

"Tell her not to run off."

"I'll tell her nothing of the kind," I said.

I took Amy back to the village and dropped her off at the marina where she had parked the canoe.

"Do I have to talk to them again?" she asked.

"I'll be there if you do," I said.

"There's nothing for you to worry about. You did the right thing, and we're grateful for your help."

"I didn't save him," she said. And I watched her walk away staring sadly at the ground.

It was late afternoon when Morrison and I sat across from each other at a Wendy's down the highway east of the village. Like me he

was single and hadn't wanted to go home to a frozen dinner.

I watched him stick a plastic fork into a baked potato over which he had slathered a blanket of yellow cheese.

"Looking for an angioplasty?" I said.

"Looking for your theory. You wouldn't be here with me unless you wanted to talk."

"Well, I think I've got more than a theory," I said, watching him grab for some water: apparently the potato was hot.

I told him about Hixon. "He's got a boat and may have used it, although I don't think so. Because of his record and that phone call, I'm sure we can get a search warrant if you want to take a peek at his things. I'll vouch for the boy's word. I thought Hixon might have phoned an old partner of his, but the partner lives where there's no phone. I think Hixon called someone right near here."

"And who would that be?"

I bit off a mouthful of chicken and sipped at my coffee.

"First of all, let me say I believe Amy's story that the murder took place between the time Gerald Webster closed his door and the time Amy regained consciousness. No telling how long that was. But if Hixon had landed a boat behind the trailer—and would he have landed

it anywhere else?—he'd have had to arrive about the same time Amy did. There's quite a stretch of water out there. Why didn't she see him?"

"Maybe he came by truck."

"Would you have risked it? People know him out there. No, I don't think he was in on the killing. I don't think anyone was who approached the trailer from the south side. Why would they walk all the way up to the sea grape trees to get that brick? Had to be somebody who came down the road. And it had to be somebody who knew Amy was deaf."

He wiped something off his lip. "Why's that?"

"Picture it. A blind man in the doorway wouldn't see an assailant approaching the trailer. A deaf girl with her back turned wouldn't hear anyone approaching. Why did the blind man suddenly close the door?"

Morrison was nodding. "He heard footsteps crunching on the shells."

"She was tugging at his hand, and he could tell that the sounds weren't coming from her. So he got scared and pulled away. And she stood there unable to figure out what had happened."

"And she got hit on the head," Morrison said.

"I don't suppose you'll find fingerprints on that brick," I

said, "although it's possible. But I'd look hard for Primm's fingerprints inside the trailer. We know that Primm's wife was in there, using the phone. But she said he never went in there because of the dog."

"But the dog wasn't there."

"Exactly. And a phone call from Hixon told him that. His wife was at the grocery store. All he had to do was walk down there, do the deed, come back, get into the shower, and claim he had no idea what was going on."

"You think his wife didn't know?"

"I doubt she'd've called it in if she did."

It took a while. It wasn't until after we had found her husband's fingerprints inside Webster's trailer that Mrs. Primm told us about her husband's obsession with getting Webster's point of land. He was a limited partner in the firm that had developed the peninsula and had tried every legal channel to get Webster's place condemned. Joined to the rest of the penin-

sula, that point would be worth millions, he had told her.

The clincher was a remnant of cloth in a barbecue pit behind his house. It was from a shirt he had burned. There were traces of Webster's blood on it.

As part of a plea bargaining arrangement, Hixon admitted having made the call to Alexander Primm for a promised one hundred dollars. Apparently Hixon had turned down an offer from Primm to "encourage" Mr. Webster to quit the peninsula and put his land up for sale.

The day the case went to the grand jury, Morrison showed up at my Fort Myers office and made the comment I had more or less, sooner or later, expected to hear.

"I guess you worked extra hard on this to make sure your friend Amy Larsson didn't get accused. Guess you didn't want any misgivings about this case."

"Had to say it, didn't you?"

He was laughing as he left the office.

FICTION

Urban Pageant

by Karen Skowron

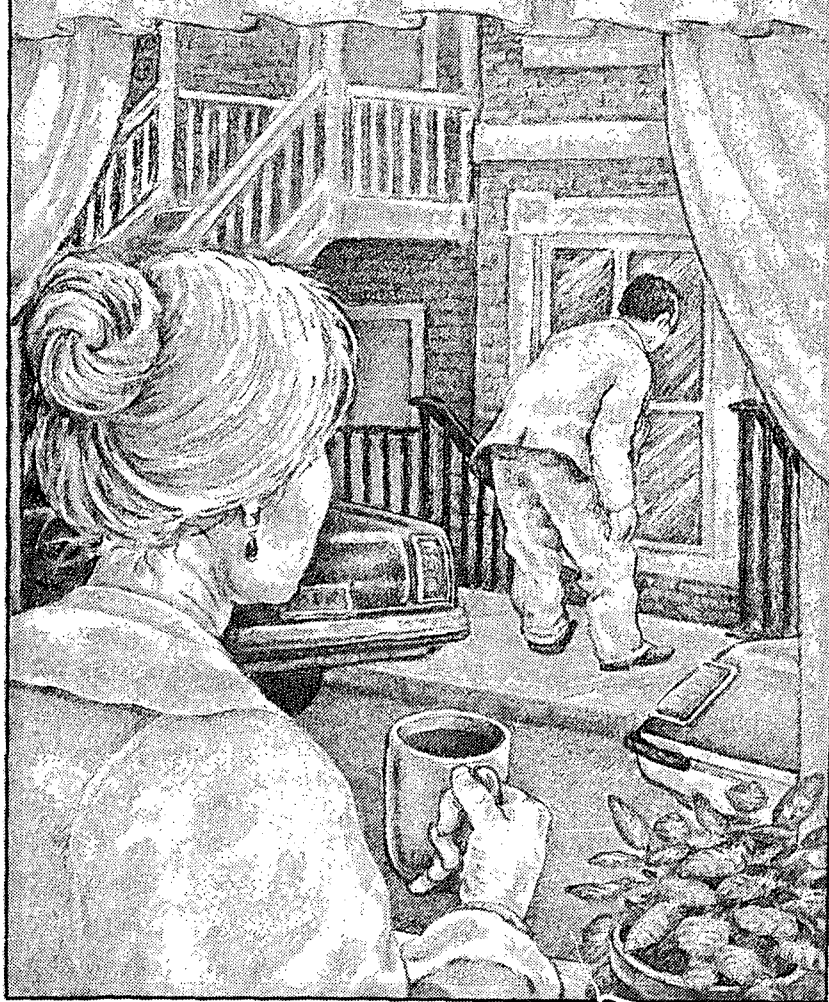


Illustration by Donald Cook

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Suddenly I'm not getting much sleep, here in the city. It's not noise or pollution or crime. Well, a crime is a factor, but in an odd sort of way. You be the judge. In the meantime I walk the floor of my flat, stare out at the street, become aware of my nocturnal neighbors. You'd be surprised at how many people are out and about in the wee hours. At least I, a transplant from the suburbs, am amazed.

Last week Mrs. O'Shaunassy died in her apartment across the street from me. That's when it all started.

According to the daily paper, "cause of death is under investigation, foul play has not been ruled out." According to neighborhood chatter, she was strangled with her bathrobe cord, gashed on the head with a poker, hit with a brick, beaten. And each of these bits of news is accompanied by relevant details.

I found it all confusing and was holding onto panic until someone came up with a motive. Robbery or rape didn't seem likely as Mrs. O'Shaunassy didn't give the appearance, in her basement flat with rather dingy lace curtains, of being anywhere near rich, and she was old and warty.

Having dismissed these reasons for being done to death, neither of which would have unduly alarmed me as I am neither rich nor beautiful although, I must admit, not as far a degree from those states that Mrs. O'Shaunassy is, uh, was. But as I was saying, this left the idea of a madman, a senseless, useless slaying. And this did scare me. I was hoping to hear that she had had a stash of valuable jewelry or didn't believe in banks, and someone had found this out and tried to rob her and this was the reason she was attacked.

I said as much to Benjamin, the young man who lives in the flat above me. He works for the gardening department of the city taking care of two of the downtown parks and some of the sidewalk trees. They have to be watered regularly. I never would have thought of this. He is saving to take a course in landscape agriculture, or do I mean architecture, oh, whatever.

"It would make you feel better to have a sane motive, would it?" he asked.

"That sounds a bit crass, doesn't it? But yes, it would."

He gave my arm a pat and would likely have left his hand there with that hangdog expression I sometimes catch on his face if I hadn't moved away from him. His youthful affection is quite flattering, but I do find it puzzling. He's an attractive man and seems

to have a number of girlfriends. He calls them friends who are girls—it seems to make something clear to him but to me it just feels like a playing the field type of guy. Anyway, what he sees to be attracted to in me is a bit incomprehensible. He's scarcely older than my eldest son.

In fact it was this son, Matt, who had known Benjamin several years ago, they both played in a minor hockey league or something like that. He recognized him when he, Matt, was helping me move into this flat and asked Benjamin to keep an eye on me.

He explained, at great and embarrassing length I thought, that I was doing this crazy thing of moving into the city, downtown core, from a perfectly good house in the lake district on the outskirts of the city. He, Matt, at least thought I could have chosen a nice condo somewhere nice. Then I guess he realized what he was saying could be taken as criticism of Benjamin's living quarters and location, and he had the grace to become silent. Benjamin had given me a knowing sort of look, sort of an old and wise look. As if he understood completely the reason for my move.

Which, when I explained it to him later, it seemed he did understand, at least he nodded in all the right places and when I was finished he said, "That took a great deal of courage, to do what you did."

Well, I thought so. But no one else seemed to have realized it. My kids all tried to dissuade me, even my most unconventional daughter. They all had different reasons, but not one of them realized it was brave of me to change the patterns of a lifetime, make a move in my middling years.

I didn't burn all my bridges. I rented the house in the suburbs. I could always go back. But I'm liking it here more and more.

Mrs. O'Shaunassy's dying hasn't stopped me liking it; it has, however, added a new dimension.

You see, I felt I knew her. I'd talked to her many times during the year and a half that I'd been here in the city. We would meet in the grocer's or at the fish market. Once or twice I had coffee with her in the little deli beside the laundry. She was a widow, as I am. We talked about this a bit although she's a generation ahead of me. Was. I guess I can't really believe she's gone. Funny, because I knew, or accepted, that my husband was gone the minute he died. But then he'd been sick for a long time.

In the city I know everyone in my neighborhood. Well, not everyone, but all the regulars. After twenty-four years in the suburbs I

knew maybe a quarter of the people around me. I have to admit where I'm living now is far more condensed, there are a lot of people. I like it.

So Mrs. O'Shaunassy was a friend. I'd been in her place twice, maybe three times. She didn't have a fireplace, so I don't agree with the notion that she was hit with a poker.

I do volunteer work over at the health coop, and one of the doctors, whose brother is on the police force, gave the following information. She said the police are really puzzled because they are not sure how Mrs. O'Shaunassy really died. She had a gash in her forehead, and there was blood on the corner of a sharp table; she also had a dressing gown cord sort of tied around one of her ankles.

This prompted a lot of discussion in the waiting room at the health center. The doctors are a chummy lot, and as well as my doctor there was another one, a nurse practitioner, and six or seven patients all giving opinions.

Sal, one of the girls at the desk, finally broke into all the theories and mystery stories people had read and one even thought of extra-terrestrial intervention and said, "Maybe it was an accident."

There was a moment of rather shocked silence, but then this was countered with, "But what about the tablecloth pulled on the floor and the dishes all smashed so they don't know if she was alone," and "It was someone clever all right to tie that around her ankle and make it look like an accident," and "That old lady must have had money, she always buys grapes and strawberries year round." And so on.

All I concluded was that it must have been a really confusing situation to have to unravel.

Benjamin had brought me a seedling tree to nurse into sturdy toddlerhood. He finds things in sidewalk cracks or inappropriate places in flowerbeds and brings them to me, and I get them established in my sunny windows and then he sneaks them back to someplace suitable. There's a chestnut tree, one of our "babies," doing very well over in Riverdale Park. Benjamin took me there to see it, and we had a picnic beside it and said we'd have a picnic under it one day, should we live so long. I figure if we do Benjamin will be wheeling me there in a chair. Not to worry. That's long in the future, and the present is quite adequate for now.

As I was fussing over the sorry-looking twig in a ripped-down soda can (Benjamin uses whatever comes to hand to transport these

orphans), I told him what I had learned at the health center.

"It's all so complicated," I finished, "that I bet the likeliest solution is the simplest one and it was an accident and she tripped on her bathrobe cord. I mean, there were no marks of violence or a struggle on her body."

"Could be a very clever thief, or whatever," Benjamin offered.

"She was not a meek woman," I told him. "She wouldn't have stood quietly while someone tied up her feet and then pushed her."

I started away from Benjamin to put the now transplanted twig onto the sunniest windowsill. In an instant one of my feet was pushed out from under me and I was falling forward, unwilling to let go of the darned now-nurtured plant, one arm flailing, sundry furniture about to break my fall to the floor, when Benjamin's arm caught me. He's big and strong, and he righted me with no problem, turned me to face him, all the while saying in this calm voice, "There, see how easy it is to trip somebody up. My brother and I used to do it to each other all the time—"

He stopped then because he realized the horror on my face was not entirely due to my loss of balance, no, not at all. I was trying to compose my features, assume a less vulnerable expression, but I simply could not.

Suddenly Benjamin got it. "Oh god, Ellen," he said, pulling me to him in a hug. I was all stiff in his arms, the plant held protectively against my chest. "Oh god, Ellen, no, I didn't do it. I didn't kill Mrs. O'Shaunassy. You know I didn't. I wasn't even in town. You know I wasn't."

"I forgot for a moment," I said into the fabric of his gardening overalls.

Well, it took awhile, two cups of tea, a number of apologies, several shared deep-breath-and-raised-eyebrow-looks to settle the incident and reestablish the trust of our friendship. Amazing how quickly the taken-for-granted assurance can be tested, challenged.

Benjamin had to go off finally and do a shift of evening watering. Maybe I was still in a bit of shock. In any case I was sitting out on the stoop when Mr. Urquhart walked by. You seldom see him without his wife. They seem to be inseparable. A middle-aged couple, a bit rabbit in appearance both of them, who live in one of the brightly painted houses by the community center. They grow vegetables in their front garden, and last fall Mrs. Urquhart gave me three just-picked tomatoes when I stopped to admire her harvest. I ate two of them before I got home, sun-warmed, delicious.

"Nice evening," he said to me as he was passing my building and I was about to reply and ask after his wife but he went on, "Too bad about all that, eh?" nodding his head across the street.

I started to respond but again did not get a chance. "I actually was instrumental in the investigation," he said. He has a trace of some accent, and his English is very precise. "Yes, I helped to establish the time of death. I was passing by and my shoelace was undone and I stopped to do it up and I saw Mrs. O'Shaunassy in her apartment. I waved at her. This was at three in the afternoon. So she was living then. Then I went home to my wife, who was waiting for me to have tea with her."

He stopped for breath and it is at this point that I think the shock of being tripped by Benjamin was still clouding my mind because I didn't think at all but spoke out my sudden realization, "Why, Mr. Urquhart, I saw you that day. I saw you stop and peer down into her window. I didn't see you wave or tie up your shoe—"

It was my turn to stop as a look of horror spread over his face. He clutched his chest, gave me the sickliest of smiles, more a grimace, then sort of staggered away. I was puzzled, of course. It took me awhile, and then I got it. I'm not much of a reader of mystery stories or watching such things on TV. But I have raised five kids, and I guess a mother's natural detective abilities get honed over the years.

The way I figure it, after working backwards from the fact that Mr. Urquhart did not have an untied shoelace and did not wave to Mrs. O'Shaunassy, is that he was establishing an alibi. Maybe, initially, he was just checking on her. I deduce—Mrs. Urquhart had tea or a visit with Mrs. O'Shaunassy and either did her in for some reason (maybe she had a brother who taught her how to trip someone as effectively as Benjamin had tripped me) or else Mrs. O'Shaunassy fell accidentally. And died. And Mrs. Urquhart didn't do anything (I had heard that death was thought to have been instantaneous) but went home and told her husband. Then he walked by and checked and maybe saw Mrs. O'Shaunassy lying there or maybe he couldn't see anything but the lack of activity convinced him of what his wife had said. So he made up the story of seeing her alive and waving to her. Because then, if anyone discovered his wife had been there having tea, his evidence got her safely home while Mrs. O'Shaunassy was still "alive." It all makes sense, doesn't it? That's what I keep asking myself.

And that's why I lie awake at night.

Well, actually there's more.

Maybe I did what I subsequently did because I was afraid I'd be murdered in my bed by a Mr. Urquhart determined to protect his wife at all costs and getting rid of me being one of the payments. But I don't really think so. I think years of being a mother detective have given me confidence in my ability to read people, to unravel situations. Lord knows I did it enough with my kids over the years. I got quite a track record.

I think it all happened as I envisioned it.

So that evening, before I went to bed, I phoned the Urquharts. Mr. Urquhart answered, sounding scared. I just said, simply, "This is Ellen Bradshaw. Don't worry. I have no intention of saying anything to anybody about this. Accidents happen." This much I had thought out and written down so I could just read it over the phone. Then I added a bit of an ad lib, sort of to ease the situation. A little humor always went a long way with my family. "It's not safe to walk with an untied shoelace." Then I hung up.

Yesterday both Urquharts walked by, and they saw me on the cement porch watering the flowerboxes. (The only thing I miss here in the city is my garden; I'm on a list for a space in a nearby allotment garden.) Mr. Urquhart did not look my way, but Mrs. Urquhart did look up and she gave a bit of a wave. I waved back.

So maybe it's all going to be okay. Maybe I should have faith in the police. I guess I'm worried about the effect on that couple if they have to get involved in all this. Innocent victims.

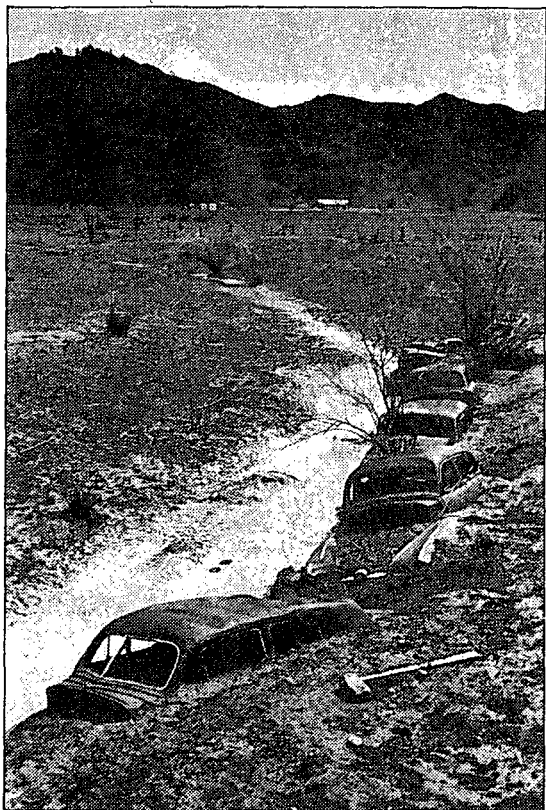
Maybe I'm afraid I'll suddenly hear that Mrs. O'Shaunassy's death has been proved to be on purpose, accident has been ruled out.

Maybe I'm afraid I'll somehow learn Benjamin was not at all out of town that day.

I am not sleeping well at night at the moment here in the city. I suppose it will all take time to settle down.

Today is my day to volunteer at the health center. I'm hoping Sal will say, in her no-nonsense voice, that the simplest solution is usually the right one and that Mrs. O'Shaunassy's death was simply an accident. And I'm going to try my best to believe her.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



David Hurn/Magnum Photos

The road not taken. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

RED ROCK CROSSING

by D. J. Bart

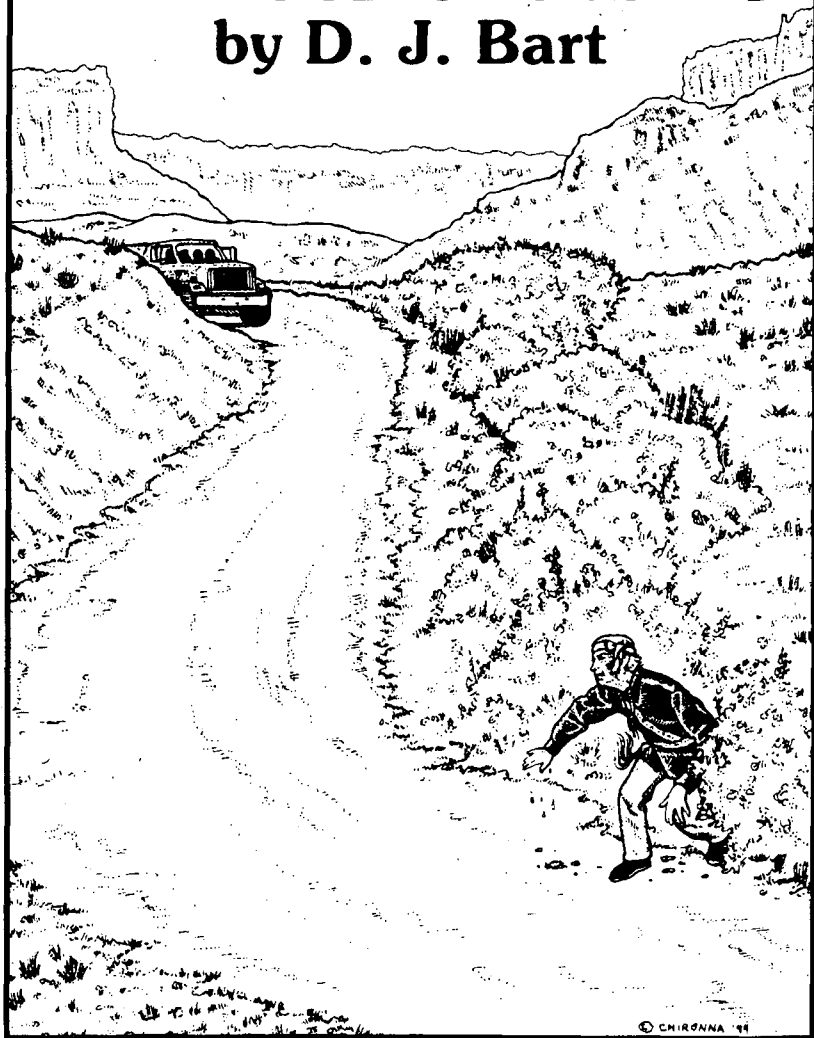


Illustration by Ron Chiroma

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“**Y**ou got a license for that?” the suit demanded, nodding at the Browning .380 peeking out from under my shirt.

The nodding was contagious. I emulated his head-bobbing, gesturing in the direction of the bulge in his suit coat under his left arm. “How ’bout you, bubba?” I asked.

He flipped open a leather I.D. holder: Detective Orville Merak—Yavapai County Sheriff’s Department. “I’m a police officer, weissenheimer, the piece comes with the territory.”

Weissenheimer? I always wondered what happened to Frank Burns after *MASH*—though this guy looked more like a humorless version of Hawkeye. Dark limp hair with an expression to match.

“Well, officer, I not only have a license to carry, I also possess a World Wildlife card, driver’s license, MegaHit Video membership card, Arizona private investigator’s license, and a bunch of notes that’re none of your business.”

I hadn’t mentioned the Chamber of Commerce card because I never go to the meetings.

“What brought you down here?” he asked.

“Target practice . . . I use a dirt bank at the Leland farm up

the road there. On the way back I saw the flashing lights.” I gestured toward the police cruiser in the parking lot whose lights were now off.

Although I’ve been known to lie to cops before, what I’d just told him was true; after spying the flashing lights, I’d turned into the lane leading down here to the crossing, to be surprised by the sunburned flocks of nosy tourists milling around along the creek. One bunch had managed to find the only patch of shade big enough to shield them from the high-desert sun beneath a stand of gnarled and ancient cottonwoods.

With macabre indifference they all ignored the multicleft red rock in the distance that rose up against the startlingly blue sky like the spires of a rusting cathedral, opting instead to ogle the prone forms lying in the tall grass by the creek.

A state bull I knew, Sam Ferris, was with a group of other cops, pants rolled up and wading in the clear cold water of Oak Creek, looking for something.

“Yo, Sammy,” I called through cupped hands, “what’s up?”

All the cops, all the tourists, *everybody* but Sam, had turned and looked up at me. Including this guy in a suit who started

up toward me from the edge of the creek.

One of the cops nudged Sam, and he glared at me across the sun-sparkled water, shielding his eyes with his hand, started to wave, and then just dropped his gaze and began visually seining the creek again.

And then Merak had come up to me. . . .

"You work out of Sedona?" the detective was now asking.

"Nope, I just keep up the license, don't do much 'vestigating any more. Just driving," I explained, nodding toward the zebra-striped Range Rover parked up from the creek in the gravel parking area. Sign on the side read RED ROCK ROVERS—SIGHTSEEING TOURS. I own six Range Rovers, three painted like zebras, three like giraffes.

"You know these guys?" he asked of the two deceased individuals lying in the tall dead grass, their clothing still soaked and clinging. Presumably they'd both been pulled from the creek.

Yet again I nodded. Once you get started with head movements, it's hard to stop.

Maggie was at the computer, frowning at the machine with the frustration of those of us who are technologically inept. Someone was on hold—line two was flashing impatiently—and

Kachina, her black and white cat, was twining around the pedestal of her swivel chair loudly demanding tuna, or chicken. I don't speak feline.

"You might want to update the personnel file," I told her. "I found out why Kenny and Tim didn't show for their tour shifts."

Maggie's dark red eyebrows rose in perfect unison. Much of her was paired in perfect symmetry, and I admired the balanced look a great deal; for example, her eyes were bright green and seemed to be a matched set.

The intimate part of our relationship had been fleeting, however; it'd come and gone, and now we were "yust frens" as the Swedish grandma of a boyhood chum used to say. Friends, in addition to the boss/employee thing.

I began to explain about our drivers. "Down at Red Rock Crossing. Looked like some kind of marketing dispute over a quantity of controlled substances."

"Drugs," Maggie said softly.

"I thought I said that."

"What the hell happened, Will?" she shouted in a petulant, demanding tone. You'd've thought we were married.

"Somebody stabbed Tim to death, bonked Kenny and he drowned . . . and it was some-

one who's evidently unaffected by pristine beauty: towering red monoliths, sparkling clear water, and—"

She was on her bare feet now, her exquisite body tensed and all but vibrating. "Is everything so goddamned funny to you?"

"No, Maggie. All that fighting in Europe is not funny, world hunger is not funny, and most of all, *Cosby* is not funny."

Now she's shaking a sheaf of lined green paper under my nose. "Two people we know are dead and you're joking—well, laugh this off." More brandishing of ledger sheets. "You like cowboy jargon? Your tour company is close to *plumb broke*."

When miffed, she tossed her head around a lot. The static electricity stiffened the strands of her short dark red hair, and the effect was kind of interesting, resembling an exploding copper helmet.

She was right, though; we were on the brink of insolvency. Brink, hell, we had our toes in a pool of trouble, and the flood was rising. I needed every dime I could pry loose from the eager tourists willing to pay for an opportunity to rubberneck large red rocks.

"Well?"

I squinted. "Are you angry?"

Maggie snorted and threw the papers up in the air. She switched off the computer and stormed out of the office, marching right across the busy highway bisecting Sedona without even slowing for a camperload of lowans and almost creating an incident that would have been the highlight of their vacation—"She just stepped right out in front of us, officer, and we couldn't do a thing..." and then later, "... flatter than a piglet under a sleepy sow," they would have told their neighbors back in Otumwa.

But the camper driver swerved to miss a backing-up Toyota, simultaneously avoiding my favorite bookkeeper, and continued on his way without realizing how close he'd come to creating a topic of conversation that would have lasted well into the next century.

Maggie whisked her shapely bod into the Eclectic Eel Gift Gallery and Cafe, presumably to quell her anger with a veggie sub and a couple of stiff iced teas. She'd be there at least a couple of hours commiserating about dumb, chauvinistic bosses with her salesperson girlfriend, Paula.

I opened a can of tuna, forked about a third into my mouth, gave the rest to Kachina, and

checked the messages while chewing. My brother had called long distance, Maggie's note said, and said he'd try again later if he didn't crash and burn on his mail run to Beaver Falls, a little wide spot in the wilderness a mere two hundred miles outside of Nome, Alaska. I wondered if he had hit on Maggie over the phone—during his visit last fall they had gone out a bunch of times.

"Pardon us," a voice said shyly.

I turned and watched as six people filed into the cramped office, glancing around with the fevered expectancy one usually associates with carnival rides. Shuffling across the gritty floor, they sounded like an old soft-shoe vaudeville act that'd just escaped from forced retirement.

"You're the one o'clock," I told the older of the two men.

He frowned.

"The one o'clock tour," I elaborated, examining the group milling around before me.

Pretty much the usual mix: a man and wife out West for a respite from omnipresent cornfields, flooding rivers, and energy-sapping humidity; newlyweds gazing longingly at each other as if they'd rather be back in their motel room; two young female teachers with identical white wicker handbags large

enough to have brought their entire third-grade classes in.

And reflected in the dark computer screen I noticed myself, Will Devin: thirty-five-year-old entrepreneur, brown hair and beard, blue eyes, and as close to exactly six feet tall as you can get, although I appeared much smaller in the computer screen.

One of the teachers spoke. "We're ready to saddle up," and she giggled.

"Saddle up," I said as I ushered the group out the door. "That's one of those folksy Western sayings, isn't it?"

Both the teachers giggled, tightly clutching their mammoth handbags as if they were stuffed with booty from a daring library heist. I noticed the taller of the two was blinking and I was about to comment, thinking she had something in her eye, but then I realized she was trying to be seductive.

At the Range Rover I said, "Well, folks, pile on in this gee- raff lookin' vehicle here, and we'll hit the trail," affecting a Western drawl Maggie often claimed was short of authentic by about the length of the Brooklyn waterfront that had spawned me.

Inside the truck I told them, "We'll head out to the Village of Oak Creek and see Bell Rock first . . .," letting my voice trail

off as if the day was to be packed with sightseeing wonders too numerous to detail.

They ignored me, though; they were busy making cute remarks about the brown and white spotted paint job. I'd had Chick Dulmers up in Flagstaff paint the animal hide designs on my Rovers. Initially I'd intended to name the tour business Sedona Safaris but had belatedly decided to call it Red Rock Rovers, a shameless but catchy Madison Avenue-type alliteration. It's a name I've since regretted.

"Red rover, red rover, let Beth come on over," the shorter of the two schoolteachers was chanting loudly from the back seat, blissfully unaware that one out of three of my passengers on every tour sang the same goddamned thing.

I grinned widely into the mirror at the clever woman, wondering what the penalty would be for running over an elementary school teacher from Indiana. Surely they wouldn't blame me.

Wrenching the wheel to the left, I swerved suddenly. "Tor-toise!" I exclaimed, and then glanced in the mirror to see the effect of my ruse. There hadn't really been a jay-walking turtle on the road; I'd just swerved to shut up the woman who'd been chorusing merrily into the

fourth stanza. She winked at me.

The British four wheel drive vehicles had been very expensive, especially for a business start-up, but they required zero repairs and with religious maintenance would last forever. And they handled off-road just as advertised. Plus, many of the European tourists came to me because of the Rovers instead of to the other guides with Jeeps or Toyotas.

After showing the group the domed monolith dubbed Bell Rock and other landmarks around the Village of Oak Creek, I headed west on the dirt road leading to Red Rock Crossing from the less traveled back way. I figured that by the time we got to Oak Creek, the bodies would be on ice and the cops would be hot on somebody's trail.

This time I had to execute a swerve capable of causing liver failure, just missing the old Indian (Max?) who'd been coming out of the underbrush after the bend in the road, and then we were lurching up the shallow incline out of control, red dirt billowing around the windows like a dusty storm of dried blood.

The schoolteacher duo reached perfect pitch somewhere in the vicinity of my middle ear, and at a decibel

range right up there with the intensity of a terrified choir of screech owls. I was pushing the brake pedal nearly through the fire wall and into the engine compartment, and then we were plowing down the incline sideways, finally coming to a stop halfway on the rock-strewn shoulder, halfway in the tiny arroyo that served as a ditch alongside the road.

Out of the truck, I glanced around, trying to peer through the lingering cloud of red dust and looking up and down the road for the Indian, letting my gaze linger on the line of trees in the distance down by Oak Creek. I was still wondering if it'd been Max; I didn't get more than a flash of him, saw the headband and dark skin. His clothes appeared a little damp. The old Hopi sometimes hawked his jewelry down at the crossing—there was less competition than in town or over in New Mexico at Santa Fe.

But he'd disappeared; Max or not, there wasn't an Indian in view.

If it had been Max, I wondered if he'd been down at the crossing earlier, perhaps even before Kenny and Tim had been murdered. What had he seen down there—had he run into Kenny and Tim himself, or witnessed who had?

*

"... understand your secretary had some trouble over drugs a couple of years back," Detective Merak said in that cop tone that was supposed to communicate self-assuredness.

We were in my office. A couple of papers from Maggie's tantrum were still on the floor, and I'd decided I couldn't pick them up without seriously damaging my self-esteem.

"Maybe you should talk to her," I replied, teasing Kachina with the cuff of my jeans. He bit the frayed denim while simultaneously clawing my scuffed boot.

"She around?" Merak inquired.

I didn't want to get into anything about my tiff with Maggie earlier, so I just said, "She must be shopping or something."

"Then why don't you just give me the skinny on her and maybe I won't have to bother her." The good detective accompanied his suggestion with the semblance of a smile, kind of a male version of Mona Lisa with an attitude.

The phone rang.

Merak looked at the instrument with open disdain.

"I'll let the machine take it," I said, and he nodded appreciatively.

I explained about the daughter, feeling a little intrusive,

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PEOPLE
WOULD
KILL...



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talking about Maggie's affairs in her absence. "She was only ten years old . . . a school friend talked her into experimenting. It was bad stuff and she died."

Merak was about to speak when the answering machine beeped and my brother's booming words began careening off all surfaces in the office, filling the room with enough voice for six men.

"Is this the fabled office of former P.I. and present-day captain of industry Will Devin? Well, I had another close call over by Beaver Falls, flipped ol' Big Bird on that little river north of there. Hey, when you coming up?"

Big Bird was the name of my brother's bright yellow Piper. He made mail drops and supply runs all over remote areas in Alaska to families and others of reclusive bent. Summer and winter. A strange guy, often saying things like, "I love mosquitoes, they're something I can kill without getting in trouble."

He finished with a limerick that violated most of the FCC regulations governing communications. Then said, "Call me sometime, bro, or I'll have to come down there and beat the crap out of you."

I looked at Merak and shrugged. "My older brother . . . thinks he's an airborne Jer-

emiah Johnson . . . bush pilot up in Alaska."

The detective got up and walked to Maggie's work area, stared at the tiny pink dinosaur sitting on the computer terminal, then turned back and looked at me thoughtfully. "You think her daughter's death might have screwed her up mentally?"

I picked up Kachina and put him on the windowsill. "No, Merak, I don't think Maggie is crazy. I could spot that in a New York minute."

He nodded slowly and then suddenly flashed a wide, friendly grin. "Hey, what the hell is a New York minute anyway?" His smile was as contagious as his nodding had been that morning, and surprisingly disarming.

I grinned back. "I assume it's ten seconds of rude behavior."

Without missing a beat Merak asked, "She could've killed those boys, though, huh?"

I stared at the cop. After a moment I said, "You're good, Merak," shaking my head, "but no, Maggie could *not* have killed those boys."

"What about the old man?" he asked quickly.

Max, he must mean. But I asked, "What old man?"

The grin again. "Your school-teachers said you almost ran

down an old Indian the other side of the crossing. Word has it you're close to him. What's his name?"

"Max Trepah," I replied, seeing it was no good playing stupid although I'd had plenty of practice throughout my life.

"Word also has it that Kenny Chalkon and Tim Vogler were seen harassing the old Indian down by Tlaquepaque Village last week."

That was news to me. If I'd known about it, I'd have been all over those guys, just as I had been about their selling dope.

"You saying you suspect an old man of killing two strong young guys all by himself?" I asked.

Merak just stared at me.

"Anybody see him down at the crossing, *with* the boys?" I asked.

The detective shook his head and shrugged. "Hey, sport, you know the drill. No matter how unlikely the lead, I gotta follow it."

I gazed out the office window and across the highway to the wide shoulder where four tour buses were parked and idling. "Probably some middle management doper from Phoenix did those boys, a kind of hostile takeover of territory," I said.

Merak reached out and turned the doorknob. "You tell

your secretary I got a couple of questions, okay?"

After dark, Maggie and I headed north through Oak Creek Canyon on the highway that eventually leads up to the seven thousand foot plus altitude of Flagstaff. Vaguely discernible, the night-blackened cliffs towered over us on either side like Gothic battlements.

We were heading to a cabin I own in the upper canyon that I rent out to Phoenix people in the summer who want to escape the heat. That week it was empty, and I was thinking maybe Max would be there. He knew where the key was, and I've told him to stay there if he gets caught after dark; I don't like him hitchhiking up to the reservation at night.

"You think he might have seen something down at the crossing?" Maggie asked me, fidgeting compulsively . . . or guiltily, if I had believed she could be the killer.

I figured her nervousness to be worry over Max, but I've never been one to euphemize. "Detective Merak told me that four tourists saw Max last week at Tlaquepaque, hawking his jewelry, and that Kenny and Tim had been taunting him and pushing him around."

She looked out the window at the black canyon, made fea-

tureless by the night. "Hard to believe they're dead," she said quietly.

"That's what they get for missing work," I said spontaneously, then regretted it but it was too late to feign compassion. I tensed, anticipating another outburst about my gallows humor.

But she just nodded, her thoughts apparently on fate's capricious indifference to human mortality.

Quick to pluck this bit of luck, I agreed. "Yeah, hard to believe."

And I pictured my two dead drivers before their deaths: undependable and always late, both of them exhibiting a kind of irreverent disregard for convention that made it difficult for many people to suffer their company.

For extra measure I repeated, "Hard to believe."

Maggie turned toward me, and I feared I'd taken my obscuriousness too far. Even in the faint glow of the dash lights I could see a frown.

"Look, Will, I can appreciate your dark humor, and frequently I do . . . it was just that today, earlier, you seemed so indifferent to what I might be feeling, joking about drugs and all as if you had forgotten what I'd been through."

She was right, of course. As an empathetic, sensitive-type person I'm akin to an armadillo with calluses.

We pulled off the highway and into my drive and crossed the creek noisily, water splashing the underside of the Rover. My cabin was located above the creek overlooking a small meadow that was always flooded in the spring.

Max was sitting on the porch swing, little more than a darker shadow amongst the many black shapes. A faint interior light glowed through the window with the approximate illumination of a small jar of fireflies.

"Cops're asking about you," I said after Maggie and I had joined him on the porch. I took a deep breath of cool, green-smelling air, slightly humid from the creek.

"Did you see anything at the crossing?" Maggie asked.

Max sighed and spoke softly into the darkness. "Your last tenants left a six-pack of Heineken—tastes a little flat."

About to lay the "beggars can't be choosers" bromide on the old man, I instead glanced over at Maggie. She was fidgeting around, visibly agitated.

"What did you see?" she asked impatiently.

"Waded the creek to get away from those punks," he

said with his practiced laconic style. Over the years he'd adopted a stereotypical manner for the tourists—the stoic Native—that had become a habit.

"Then they were still alive when you crossed the creek. What took you so long to get to where I almost hit you?" I said.

I could see him shrug indifferently, his weathered bronze profile as impassive as a canyon wall. "I'm old," he said simply.

Maggie was nervously pinching the muted crease back into the leg of her tan walking shorts.

The Indian belched loudly and turned his bleary gaze on me. "You're a little short of drivers. You wanna hire an old renegade with no license?"

I snorted. "That's just what I need, an unlicensed redskin piling up a truckload of pale-faces in that deep arroyo below Coffeepot Rock."

"Too many of you white people around anyway," Max declared. "Might be a real effective form of population control."

Over in Prescott, the Yavapai County Seat, they decided to hold Max overnight, without charging him officially. He went with the jailer like he was following an usher in a dark

movie theater, tentative but relaxed.

I'd known that my drivers, Kenny Chalkon and Tim Vogler, had been dealing crack, but I hadn't been aware that Maggie knew until I saw her gold pen in the clear plastic evidence bag.

I recognized the ballpoint pen by the tiny smudge of copper-colored nail polish on the clip. She was always leaving it around, saying, "I don't want a Cross to bear." And I'd always responded appropriately with animal noises.

"Had close to a half pound of crack between 'em," Merak told Maggie and me as he held up the bags of evidence, one with drugs in it and the other encasing items found at the scene of the murder.

Merak pointed at the pen. "Found this in the water near the Chalkon kid; I thought it was a tiny vein of gold for a second."

Maggie reddened, glanced at me without eye contact, and turned away.

So she'd been at the creek; She must have known that Kenny and Tim were going to be there that morning to distribute drugs to their grade school contacts and must have been waiting in the tall grass near the creekside. In the struggle her pen had fallen into

the creek. That's why she'd been so anxious about what Max had seen at the crossing.

Merak questioned her for about fifteen minutes and then we left. She denied being at the creek.

On the way back over to Sedona, I asked, "Did you go there to kill them?"

Maggie turned quickly in her seat to face me. "No!"

I looked into a deceptively placid face, completely expressionless from the emptiness she must have been feeling. I cared about her and wished her no harm; still . . .

"We can't just let Max take the heat," I told her, ambivalence nipping at my insides like a pair of quarreling coyote pups.

Maggie's eyes glistened, and she looked away. After a long moment she hunched her shoulders, putting her hands on her knees, pressing them tightly together. "I didn't kill them, Will. I just went there to ask them to stop selling that stuff."

You wish! I thought, unable to believe her. "What happened?"

She bit her lower lip. "They denied they were there to sell crack. They said they were just playing hookey from work to get some sun."

"And?"

"So I left . . . uh, went to see . . . well, I came to work."

"What about the pen?"

"It was already hot; I took off my jacket and it must have fallen out."

I'd confronted them myself about what I'd heard—that they'd taken up a new enterprise in the community, selling crack to kids. It was just a few days before they'd ended up dead at the crossing.

Grabbing Tim by the collar, I had pulled him so close that the aggressive intimacy made us both uncomfortable. "Listen, Timmy-boy, you guys are all right for the most part, but you both know that poison you're dealing is what killed Maggie's little girl; I don't want anybody working for me who would hurt kids."

"Hey, Will, we don't sell to kids," Kenny had said, "and anyway, it's just to make some serious bucks for school—Arizona State ain't cheap, ya know."

I released Tim and stepped back. "I want your word that you'll give it up or I'll not only fire your asses, I'll drop a dime on you faster than a lizard through a boot factory."

Palms up, Kenny had said, "Okay, boss, no problem-o."

I had glared at Tim who clearly was reluctant to agree.

Kenny nudged him, and finally he nodded.

Ice. That's how I'd felt, so goddamned angry, I'd gone way past hot and was chilled to the core. I could have happily throttled the both of them right then and there.

And if I was coldly indifferent to the boys' fate, I thought, looking over at Maggie, if I was cold, what the hell must she have felt that morning at the creek?

"Christ, Merak, you don't have to cuff her!" I complained. It was all I could do to keep from jerking the handcuffs away from him.

Maggie was looking down at the floor of my office, avoiding even her cat's upward stare. They'd lifted her prints off the pen found at the murder scene. The water had faded them, but there was still enough residual body oil to give a complete thumb and middle finger.

"I'll get somebody from Phoenix," I told her, referring to the hiring of a lawyer.

Maggie said, "Uh, your brother . . ." then just shrugged and allowed herself to be escorted to the police cruiser by the female officer.

After they'd left I sat down at her desk and reviewed everything.

Max had been at the crossing, but now they believed his story about the boys' chasing him off with their taunting, that they'd been alive when he'd left. Maggie had been there also, dropping her pen, allegedly during a struggle with one or both of the victims. Since she said nothing about being there, the police had gotten interested.

And I couldn't think of anything to discredit them.

I fed Kachina some vile-looking chicken parts from a tiny can and punched the replay on my answering machine. My brother's voice boomed forth, deriding me for never being around.

Maggie must've been going to tell me he called.

Just before the next message played I noticed the call-in readout, the display for call-screening: it showed a local number. I didn't see it all, though, since I hadn't expected anything to show up. The machine only displayed local numbers, and I'd expected my brother to be calling from a very long distance. Instead, it seemed he'd called from here in town. What the hell?

I thought about it for a minute and then dialed the airport. "Yeah, Carl, wondered if you got anybody in from out of town up there?"

"Couple of guys up from Tucson and one from Phoenix," he replied, "and a couple from Lake Havasu."

"Farther out of town."

I pictured him slowly tracing the names with a pudgy finger, a wide fingernail black with engine grease. "Oh, here's one, name of—well, I'll be damned, Will, guy's name is Devin, Jake Devin. Any relation?"

"Brother," I said quietly, my mind churning.

"His must be that yellow Piper pontoon that's been refitted with land wheels."

"Got a number for him?"

"No, but he listed the Montezuma Motel. You guys on the outs, Will? Ya know, family is the most—"

"Do I ask you why you're always overshooting the runway, Carl? How long's he been in Sedona?"

He mumbled something about testy people. "Checked in with the hangar boys three days ago, and I hardly ever overshoot the runway, smart —"

I'd already hung up and was dialing the Montezuma.

"Nobody here by that name."

"How about somebody with Alaska I.D.?" I asked.

A moment's pause. "Hey, how'd you know? Tom Childress, Beaver Falls, Alaska."

That was my brother's best friend up there. He'd borrowed his driver's license, no doubt. But he'd had to use his own pilot's license at the airport—FAA rules. Why the intrigue? He didn't want me to know he was in town, but why?

"Ring that room, Benny," I said.

There was no answer.

I drove over to the motel and had Benny open Jake's room. His stuff was there, but he wasn't. I left a note telling him to call me right away, scribbling at the end, "you dumb bastard."

So my own brother had been in town the day of the murder. There was absolutely no connection between him and the murdered boys. At least none I could figure. But the fact remained, he had been here, which meant, conceivably, he could be involved. Christ, what the hell was going on?

Back at the office the answering machine just sat there, mutely reminding me of how unstable my life had become in a matter of less than one week. My temper was quickly heading for critical mass, mercilessly pushing me to just, by God, *do* something.

My foot shot out and collided with the swivel chair, sending it chattering across the floor, smashing into the wall.

Kachina was calmly staring at me in that way a cat has, communicating a silent disdain for having to witness the continuing folly of a human who is clearly out of his mind.

"You don't look at me like that when you're hungry," I reminded the judgmental little furball, and walked out the door.

I headed for Red Rock Crossing from the West Sedona entrance. As I weaved down the serpentine lane I wished Max was along but figured he must have hitchhiked back up to the rez after they released him in Prescott. I could have used his help; doing a ground search with a whole bunch of people is hard enough, alone it's a lot harder. But at least it was doing something.

The gravel parking lot was full of out of state cars and motor homes. After I got out of the Rover and strapped on my butt-pack with the drinking-water bottle, I stood for a moment letting the tranquility of the place settle over me.

I watched a young girl in lime shorts and white tank-top—shoulders hunched and arms tight against her sides—as she braved the cold water of the stream, wading in slowly, screeching between each tentative step.

Starting at the murder site, I slowly made my way up the creek bank, checking the ground for anything I could find. A candy wrapper, a couple of tabs from beer cans, a broken drawing charcoal with teeth marks (man, why would you put that in your mouth?).

I crossed the creek on a row of stepping stones and started down the other side.

I'd done many of these searches as a P.I. down in Maricopa County, one of the drier aspects of the job. Of course, you got your missing people who often are only missing because they want to be; then you've got cheating husbands and wives, fake insurance claims, and all that kind of crap. Succinctly put, being a private investigator is a joke. And sometimes it transcends the ridiculous and soars right on up there into the sublime heights of total ludicrousness.

Probably why I missed it so much.

A dry tributary called Pinon Wash branched off Oak Creek about a quarter mile down. It might have had water in it the day after the murder because of the rain earlier in the week.

Walking up the creek bed, mostly dry except for tiny pools of standing water, I spotted something shiny lying next to

one of the pools about twenty yards into the wash.

I recognized the object; I had seen him with it many times. I picked it up, wiped it thoroughly with my shirttail, put it in my buttpack, and headed toward the parking lot.

Inside my Rover I called Merak over in Prescott and asked him to meet me there at the crossing.

"Tim had been stabbed in the chest, correct?"

Merak nodded, loosening his tie against the heat. He'd left his coat in the car.

"But you didn't find a murder weapon?"

He shrugged. "Killer took it with her," he said.

"Or *him*," I interjected.

Merak just looked at me, his impatience hardly noticeable, but I could feel it.

Unzipping the buttpack, I took out the unsinkable fishing knife I'd found in the dry creek bed. "Found this in a wash there," I told him, gesturing downstream with my chin, handing it to him. "It floats."

"Looks real clean," Merak said of the knife, daintily dropping it into a plastic evidence bag.

"Moving water, won't be any prints," I said. "Cept mine, of course."

He eyed me coldly. "There were prints on your secretary's pen. We found *it* in the water."

I shrugged.

"So what's your theory?" he asked.

"One of them, probably Kenny, since that's his knife, stabbed Tim, but he's a tough kid. They struggled, and he and Kenny fell and Kenny hit his head. He drowned."

Merak looked doubtful.

"When Tim fell down, he dislodged the knife, which then fell into Oak Creek and floated away and into that wash where I found it, Pinon Wash. The water receded, and the knife stayed put."

Merak sighed and turned away, looking at the distant red monolith. "This place's been in a bunch of Westerns," he said absently.

He glanced downstream a couple of times, and I could imagine his mind generating images and scenarios: knife thrusts and falling bodies, heads striking rock... struggling, dying. After a while he glanced at me obliquely, nudging a half-buried stone with his shoe tip. "Your girl passed a lie-detector her lawyer set up. Not proof of innocence of course, but—"

"Drug deals go bad all the time, Merak. It makes more

sense than to believe a hundred pound woman did them."

Glancing at the evidence bag in his hand, he asked, "And this is which one of them's knife?"

"Kenny's. He'd had it for a long time."

Merak looked downstream again, and I figured he was visualizing the floating fishing knife after it'd fallen in the stream, bobbing along in the current, buoyed by the cork handle, turning this way and that in the swift rapids, careening off underbrush and rocks as it was swept away.

"Broke it in how many places?" I asked my brother.

He grinned and loudly replied in his off-the-walls voice. "Four. Sawbones said it'd take three months to heal, but I'll con him into cuttin' this off in two." He raised his knee-high cast above the bedspread.

"You flipped Big Bird on Moosejaw River?" I asked as I bent forward and signed his cast, adding an observation concerning his character in profane colloquial terms.

"Rougher'n Toby's backside, waves musta been five foot," Jake roared. "Hell, didn't even hurt the Bird, a little patchwork and a bent aileron."

I shook my head, gazing at my huge brother, now somewhat disabled by his broken

limb. "You could have told me about your feelings for Maggie," I said.

He shifted uncomfortably on the motel bed, making it creak loudly. "I wanted to make sure she felt the same way as me before I told you I was around town courting your bookkeeper. And hell, bro, I didn't know what your feelings toward her were."

"Primarily sympathy if she's going to hook up with you."

He grinned widely, a gold eyetooth flashing happily. "She thinks I'm great. And I'm lucky to have her."

"Lonely up in the land of the midnight sun, huh?"

He tried to look offended and failed. "Hey, I've liked that girl ever since I took her out last year."

"Well, if she's going back up to Alaska with you, I need to find another bookkeeper."

"Easier to find than a good wife," Jake said with a grin that was at the same time enigmatic and goofy.

As a P.I., I'd always prided myself on my perception, but most of the time I had no idea what kind of thoughts were bouncing around inside my brother's huge head like so many quarks in a super-collider.

"You know, bro," I said to him in a serious tone, "you're

the big brother. You need to act more responsibly, need to think—”

“Hey, Will, what’s your point?”

I gazed at him for a moment, then shrugged. “Point? I’ve got no point. Let’s go get a brew.”

Later, back at my office alone, I was trying to make sense out of some paperwork, perusing my books through that cloud of lethargy a few beers in the afternoon leaves you with, when a shadow darkened the floor by the open doorway.

“Hello,” the tall schoolteacher from Indiana said softly, peeking around the door. Shorts and a halter. And the cloud lifted.

I got up quickly. “Hi.”

“Uh, your sign says you give private tours. I wondered if you could take me around tomorrow?”

“If you promise not to sing ‘Red Rover,’” I told her with a grin.

She looked alarmed. “That was Mary Ann—I’m Beth,” she assured me.

“Just kidding.”

She nodded and started to leave, then turned back. “I could bring some food, uh, like a picnic.”

“I’ll bring the wine,” I told her. “Ten o’clock sound good to you?”

*

That afternoon I’d been following a Winnebago for over thirty miles north on 89 out of Flagstaff, the traffic south so heavy I’d been unable to pass. The owner had one of those chrome fish symbols on the back, but I was feeling less than Christian toward the guy by the time I reached the junction of Highway 264 leading to the Hopi reservation.

“I hate those damn motor homes,” I said to the empty interior of the Rover.

Max lived out near the Third Mesa in a hut no bigger than an ice-fishing shack, although I doubted if he ever used it for that particular activity; frozen lakes were pretty scarce in the desert.

“You bring any Dos Equis?” he inquired as I got out of the Rover in front of his tiny home.

“What, me smuggle brew onto the rez?” I handed the Styrofoam cooler to him, the bottles of Mexican beer tinkling around in the ice. A sound of movement came from inside the hut, and I could smell frybread cooking. His granddaughter. Max had outlived his two sons and their wives.

We sat in the shade of the minuscule verandah and drank beer, watching a roadrunner hunting grasshoppers along a nearby arroyo. Beyond the skit-

tish bird the sky was a bright blue except for faint brush strokes of high cirrus; a steady wind moved the dry air past us in an invisible river of heat. The quiet seemed almost deafening.

"Thanks for vouching for Maggie," I said.

He stood, saying, "Nature calls," and walked around back toward some chaparral about a hundred yards beyond the hut. Max never acknowledged a thank you or an apology.

A few minutes later he returned and sat down on a wooden crate near the door. After a moment's musing, he said, "It was as you told them, Will, those boys killed themselves."

"You didn't really see Maggie leave that morning, did you?"

The old Indian shook his head.

"But the boys were still alive when you arrived, after Maggie had come and gone?"

Max nodded and took a swig of his Mexican beer.

"I remembered something. That morning, when I almost ran over you, your clothes were wet all over," I said.

Max belched agreement. "Slipped crossing the creek."

I waited till he looked at me. When our eyes met I tried to smile, but even though I had

committed myself to the path I was on, one of collusion, it was difficult to be cavalier. The smile faded. "You've never slipped since I've known you."

His gaze didn't waver.

"They pushed you in and tried to hold you under, didn't they?"

From inside the hut I heard the clatter of metal, a pot or something being set on the stove.

Raising my eyebrows . . . "Max?"

He finally looked out over the mesa but didn't reply.

I pulled a new floating fishing knife from my rear pocket, still in its plastic and cardboard wrapper. "To replace the one you lost," I said, handing it to him.

He accepted it without looking at it and grunted, setting the packaged knife on a small table under the window.

Pale gray clouds had formed to the west and the dim, ambient light muted the landscape, making everything appear vague and two-dimensional, like a faded painting.

"Staying for supper?" he asked evenly.

I shook my head.

"Don't eat with Injuns, huh?"

Which was just a jab; we'd taken many a meal together over the years I'd known him.

"Fry-bread sucks, Max," I said, getting to my feet.

As I walked to my Rover, the old man began singing softly to himself in his native tongue.

The next morning Beth the schoolteacher and I were up Schnebley Hill in a stand of Ponderosa pines. It was cool and breezy in the shade of the towering trees. Below, Sedona looked as clean and perfect as a village one walks through in a dream.

Beth was talking about how she had just sauntered into my office the day before and asked me for a private tour.

"I've never done *anything* that forward before."

I lay back on the blanket, feeling the pine needles poke through the cloth. "Well," I explained, "it's probably the altitude up here in the high desert."

Beth leaned over, her eyes clear as blue crystal. "I hope not," she said softly, with an expression I suspect her third-grade class will never see. She picked up my hand, her skin soft as a whisper and cheeks flushed a bright pink. . . .

A while later and we were sitting up, staring down at the valley below.

The view of Sedona was magnificent, and we sat and gazed out over the landscape, tall red

rocks jutting skyward like the strange terrain of a distant planet.

Tlaquepaque Village sat huddled along the banks of Oak Creek, its adobe shops all hooked together, resembling an ancient pueblo.

I noticed the zebra-striped Rover I'd lent my brother pull onto the stone drive of the shopping mall and park in the shade of a huge cottonwood.

"Where ya going?" Beth asked as I got to my feet and headed for my Rover a few feet away.

"Binoculars."

Just as I was getting the focus right, Max appeared next to the black and white Rover far below. He was speaking to Jake while looking around with a studied insouciance, watching the tourists going in and out of the shops. I cursed myself; a good P.I. would know how to read lips.

He handed the packaged knife I'd given him to my brother and nodded. They talked for a moment longer and then parted . . . and I could sense the aura of conspiracy even from way up there.

"What did you see?" Beth asked as I sat down next to her.

I told her, "Just a gift being passed on. . . ."

And I pictured my brother that very early morning at the

crossing, probably going down there after Maggie told him about the two boys blowing her off about selling drugs. Figured he'd straighten them out, get a couple points in with Maggie.

And he got there in time to see them dunking Max repeatedly under the cold water. Unmindful of his leg cast, he lumbered into the fray like a charging bull moose.

Tim had already taken Max's knife from him and was brandishing it in Jake's face . . . and then my strong brother turned it on him, Kenny jumping in and getting thrown, hitting his head and drowning before anyone could get to him. Tim, slumping into the water, the knife in his heart.

And Jake left, neither he nor Max feeling compelled to bring

in the authorities, both having learned by experience to distrust the kind of by-the-book justice that civilization has produced.

Max, exhausted, hid up in the shade, his clothes never drying, being out of the sun like that. Still damp, he later headed toward the Village of Oak Creek, had the encounter with an ex-P.I. cum tour guide, and hid again. . . .

Beth looked through the binoculars. Not seeing anything, she asked, "A gift?"

I glanced over at her and smiled, lay back on the blanket and stared up through the high branches of the pine, picturing the old Indian ceremoniously handing the knife to my brother.

"Well, actually . . . more of a token."

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue

Harry Kerry was a thoroughly detestable old man. He cursed his cook, he harassed his maid daily, and he kept his butler in service only by blackmail. Nor did he treat his only living relatives any better. He had summoned his sister, niece, and nephew from their respective cities to come to dinner for the sole purpose of disinheriting them all. Now this little sadistic pleasure was denied to the warped old curmudgeon. Old Harry had been murdered.

- (1) Dinner had been served promptly at 8 (as old Harry demanded), and everyone finished at 8:30 that evening. Then, without excusing himself, the host stomped up the stairs.
- (2) At 8:45, the relatives and servants met in the living room. The maid served port to Alfred, Hardin, and Madison, and beer to the owner of the pistol and the relative who came by train. She herself had wine (sneaking her employer's finest from his guarded supply in the wine cellar).
- (3) For the half hour after drinks were served, Mr. Layton played cribbage with the butler in the library, while the owner of the blackjack visited with Edgar and the relative who arrived by train. Then at 9:15 someone wandered upstairs to use the bathroom and suddenly yelled down gleefully, "Hey, everybody, the old so-and-so is dead!"
- (4) The coroner established that old Harry Kerry was murdered in his bedroom at exactly 9:00 P.M.
- (5) When Chief Gaspard arrived, Charles was comfortably ensconced on the sofa between Flora and the cook, the nephew sat in a stuffed chair, and the relative who came by bus stood by the fireplace. None of them owned the blackjack.
- (6) During the questioning, the dead man's sister accused Hardin, and the relative who came by bus accused Jarvis. None of the four possessed the dagger.
- (7) A search of the premises turned up a blackjack, a dagger, a pistol with a silencer, and a blowgun with poison darts; one

of the foregoing was the murder weapon. No one owned two weapons, and no one knew how to use effectively the weapon of another. The blowgun was too long to have been concealed in the clothing or luggage of a visiting relative.

- (8) The dagger did not belong to either Layton or Ickes.
- (9) Keene, who is a relative, is not Betty, Charles, or the one who came by plane.
- (10) Charles smoked a pipe, while Hardin chain-smoked cigarettes. Both annoyed the nephew.
- (11) Neither Delores nor the niece has the last name of Hardin or Madison.

Who killed old Harry Kerry? With what?

FICTION

The Emily Dickinson Murders

by Michelle Knowlden



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Monsoon season. The heat rose in shimmering waves from the sidewalks and wrapped wetly around all who ventured out in the Phoenix summer. Those who could escaped the city's inferno to the mountains or rivers. Those who stayed fought over shaded parking spots or the cool end of the pool. Some lingered in their grocer's freezer section. And one turned to murder.

I sat on the hard plastic seat in Fry Shack Number 17 on Monroe Highway and felt death creep upon me. It slithered in my veins like an old acquaintance with cold hands and a slow smile. Even in the sweltering dining room I sensed the chill of the next world. My nerves began to tingle, and I felt a weakness spreading through my limbs.

"Who ordered the double fries?" My cousin slid into the seat next to mine and filled the table with grease-spotted bags.

"The salad is mine," said Aunt Helena. She fished out the lemon slice in her iced tea and laid it on her napkin like a tiny jaundiced corpse.

My heart faltered, started again sluggishly, then faded, faded to nothing. No one noticed my imminent collapse. Sickening alphabetically through *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia*, I had been dying for years with little note from my loved ones.

Gregory, Aunt Helena's secretary and unpublished poet-in-residence, rearranged the tomato on his triple decker, almost beef burger. Without a word, he intercepted the order of double fries Robyn waved at us.

"Is this one of the murder scenes?" asked Helena in a compelling voice. Several Fry Shack patrons turned to look in our direction. My heart stumbled, then recovered. As I held a chip dripping with processed cheese, sharp needlelike pains darted through my fingers.

"No," said Robyn, spreading a map between the paper bag and plastic forks. "Three weeks ago, the first missing person report was called from Fry Shack Number 2 on Charles Street. A twenty-eight-year-old woman name of Emily Court, on her day off. Worked as a cashier. They found large amounts of blood, her type, in the freezer. Discovered her body in the trunk of her car the next day. Multiple stab wounds."

Robyn examined her fish sandwich dubiously. "Two weeks ago, a puddle of blood was found in the alley behind Fry Shack Number

6 on Lakeview Avenue. The blood type didn't match any missing persons' reports at the time. They found more blood under one of the tables in Fry Shack Number 11 at closing time. Again, unable to trace it. No bodies found, no witness came forward. Each of these events occurred on a Tuesday evening, between six thirty and nine thirty. Pass me a napkin, please."

The numbness traveled slowly up my arm. I passed her a napkin.

Helena looked around the small fast food restaurant. "I understand why we are at a Fry Shack. The president of DVT Industries has asked Michaela to conduct a discreet investigation into the murders. And we are here, of course, to assist her in apprehending the murderous fiend."

Helena had been "assisting" me in my investigations since my uncle died. After his death, Randal Cardex left a tiresome trust in which he named Helena first executor. Coincidentally, I contracted angina—the first of many diseases that would play havoc with my frail system. Uncle Randal also determined that his fortune would be meted out to my cousins and me in handsome monthly sums. With one stipulation. That each of us be gainfully employed in a calling that benefited society. The cousins and I assume this was a late-begotten morality. Uncle had been a cardsharp, dabbling in stocks on the side. Still there was that awful menace of labor, and the fearful form of Aunt Helena, to ensure an occupied life. It would be enough to drive anyone to her grave.

And yet I now believe that each one of us holds beneath the skin every bacterium, every genetic instability, that man has known. Eve's heritage to her kin. And once one has recognized that fact, as I have done, one is prey to all those maladies. I have written a monograph stating so, but the eastern medical establishment refuses to respond to my theory. They are an unimaginative lot, but I'm confident they will recognize the truth of my studies. Until then . . .

"But why this one?" asked Helena, interrupting my thoughts. "There are nineteen of these horrid establishments throughout the city."

"Number," I whispered hoarsely. The disease advanced into my throat, strangling my vocal cords.

"Speak up," said Helena. "What do numbers have to do with the murders?"

"Math progression," I said. Wearily, I cleared my throat. "Progression of four, five, and six. Fry Shack 2 plus four equals Fry

Shack 6 plus five equals Fry Shack 11 plus six equals Fry Shack 17, where we are today."

"People are being killed because of a number progression?" Robyn asked incredulously.

I shrugged and played with the nachos. People murder because of a bad day at the office or because their team lost in the playoffs. After four years as a private detective, the methods of and motives for murder no longer surprise me.

Quiet words interrupted my thoughts. " 'Much madness is divinest sense/ To a discerning eye;/ Much sense the starkest madness . . . ' "

"Pardon me," said Helena. At the table next to ours, the lady in a red dress who had recited the poem turned to my aunt. "Emily Dickinson," she said and resumed staring into space.

"The whole town's wacko," said Robyn, fanning herself. "It's the heat." Without commenting, I swallowed a handful of vitamins and herbal remedies my doctor had prescribed for my current ailment.

"Micky," Robyn asked me, "what's your plan of action? Wait till the murderer strikes? Should we station ourselves around the place and watch for something suspicious?"

Before I could reply, Aunt Helena in her most strident voice said, "We will question everyone here. Someone hates Fry Shacks enough to besmirch their name with heinous crimes." She looked distastefully at her wilted salad. "Which could be anyone who has tasted their food."

"Maybe an employee," suggested Robyn. "One with a grudge?"

I mopped a fevered brow and felt my heart failing once more. "We wait. The murderer will show his hand."

" 'Time is a Test of Trouble—/ But not a Remedy—/ If such it prove, it prove too/ There was no Malady—' "

"I think she's saying you're a hypochondriac," chuckled Robyn.

"Excuse me," I said coldly. The woman in red turned her mottled face to me. Her eyes were empty and her brow damp with sweat. "Emily Dickinson," she said and turned her vacant stare away from me.

"I have beriberi," I explained. Her gaze passed over me indifferently.

Helena heaved out of her seat, brushing croutons from her lap. "I will commence questioning the other diners. Gregory, check the alley for suspects, and, Robyn, you interview the workers. Mi-

chaela, make yourself useful." She swept off in a whirl of damp lavender.

The others dispersed also. I slowly gathered the abandoned cartons, paper and plastic, and ferried them into a trash container labeled PUSH. I looked around and saw Helena badgering a man with greasy whiskers. Robyn was at the front counter with her pen and notepad. I felt the gaze of the woman in red and, fearing another outpouring of Emily Dickinson, retreated to the ladies' room.

I washed my hands with tepid water and dried them in a blast of heated air. Leaving the restroom, I walked into a small boy who waited there with a hopeful look. He wore grubby jeans and no shirt. His ragged hair framed a gap-toothed smile.

"Are you Micky Cardex?" he whispered. "The famous detective?"

"I am Micky Cardex. And, like old Greek sailors and kings, have something of a name."

He looked at me uncomprehendingly. I sighed. He was probably seven and had never heard of Ulysses. The failure of public education smote me.

"Did you have something to tell me?" I asked.

He put a dirty finger to his lips and motioned me to the door of the storeroom across from the restrooms. I followed him in and stood in the dark while he fumbled for the light switch. There was a clammy feel to the air. I gripped the metal-rimmed barrel near the door and leaned against greased drywall. The glare of sudden light revealed bins and barrels lining the walls and shelves stocked with paper goods.

"There," he said. He pointed to a dark pool on the ground.

I leaned over and stirred the liquid with a pencil. It oozed thickly. It felt odd—not as thin as blood and of a deeper red.

I turned and found him watching me avidly. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Stinks," he said, and wrinkled his nose.

I reflected on the inevitable cruelty of parents. "Well, Stinks, what can you tell me about the situation?"

"My name's not Stinks," he said indignantly. "I *said* it stinks in here."

The onset of beriberi had deadened my sense of smell and taste. Fortuitously, I thought, remembering the waxy look of my lunch. "How does it smell?" I asked.

My pint-sized assistant sniffed cautiously and frowned. "Like wet pennies and old hot dogs."

I nodded. "That's a mixture of blood, which has a coppery smell, and catsup, which you've associated with hot dogs. The stain goes between those two barrels. Have a look behind them and tell me what you see."

"Can't," he said, and gave me a virtuous look. "Not allowed."

"Perhaps not," I said. I assumed a look of repugnance. "There's liable to be bones and spiders and eyeballs back there."

He shot me a look of bright joy and shinnied between the barrels. He disappeared into a dark fissure, but I could see his shadow played across the ceiling above us.

"Nothing," he reported, "No fingers, no bones, nothing. Just a rusty old knife."

"Don't touch the knife," I said quickly. I shoved a fistful of paper towels over the top of the bins at him. "Here. Pick up the knife at the point with these. And be careful—it's sure to be sharp."

"Okay, okay," he said, impatiently. After grunting for a few minutes, he came out gingerly carrying a long meat knife. I suspected the "rust" he'd seen on the blade was really blood.

This was the first break of the case. The murder weapon at the scene of the crime. Still no victim, and no report of someone missing. Just a pool of blood mixed with catsup. I wondered if the killer lingered nearby.

I emptied a plastic bag and dropped the knife into it. Then I hid it inside my jacket. I gave the child careful instructions about confidentiality and the necessity of remaining available for police questioning. He gave me a wide-eyed look, which I attributed to the gravity of the situation, and I ushered him out of the pantry. In the dining room I found the others back at our table, huddled over drink refills and elaborately diagrammed napkins. The boy ran to the woman in red polyester and sat down next to her.

"Where have you been, Michaela?" demanded Helena. "We've almost solved the case while you were gadding about."

"Washing my hands," I said. "Find anything interesting?"

"Nothing here," said Robyn. "Aunt Helena's interrogated everyone, including the customers. The manager threatened to call the police."

"Harassment, he called it," sniffed Helena. "The fool wouldn't recognize proper investigative techniques to save his life." She gave the individual, who leaned on the take-out counter, an as-

sessing look. "He's probably the next victim."

"I don't think so," I said. "Anything else?"

"Not really," said Robyn, rearranging the paper napkins. "Gregory's checked the men's room. Nothing. I looked around the parking lot and called the police. Little new there. Emily Court's funeral took place yesterday. The coroner released her body to the sister late last week. The police hope to interview the sister's husband—Court sometimes worked as his secretary. The sister says he's still out of town."

She glanced keenly around the room. "Getting close to eight. Think the killer'll make his move soon?"

I nodded slightly and checked my pulse. The thiamin deficiency was slowly ravaging my cardiovascular system. I wondered if I needed another dose of vitamin B.

"Micky?" Robyn prompted.

"Found another pool of blood," I said, tilting my head towards the stockroom. "And the murder weapon." I pulled the knife from my jacket and laid it on the table.

There ensued a brief—but poignant—silence while Helena, Robyn, and Gregory stared at the knife, stunned. Then Helena pounced on the weapon.

"Ah, an Arabic design, with a handle made of rare black ivory. We must look for a swarthy man with a gold tooth and a turban." Gregory looked nervously about the room.

"It's a common meat knife," I said. "The handle's made of polymers."

"I believe you are mistaken," Helena said icily.

"Faith is a fine invention/ For gentlemen who see;/ But microscopes are prudent/ In an emergency!" The woman in red stared glassily at the knife in Helena's hands. The boy patted her arm awkwardly. "Emily Dickinson," she told us, her eyes never leaving the blade.

"Have you seen this knife before?" I queried her. She didn't reply.

I motioned the child over. "Is she unwell?" I asked him in a low voice.

He cast her a worried look and shook his head. "They buried Aunt Emily in a box yesterday. Mom's been acting even weirder since then." He leaned against me confidingly. "They found Aunt Emily in the trunk of her car, but Mom won't tell me what she was doing in there. Do you know?"

"Maybe we can figure out what happened to your Aunt Emily," I said. "You say your mother has been acting strangely. In what way?"

"Once she came home and told me to go to bed even though it wasn't bedtime. She wasn't supposed to be home that early. She does counting for the blood bank. Aunt Emily used to babysit me when Mom worked late, but some nights she said I was big enough to be by myself and she helped Dad do his bowling."

"What happened the night your mom came home early?"

"I didn't go to bed. I waited in the bathroom and looked into the living room, through a crack under the door. A long, long time later, Dad came home, and they had a big fight. Mom was mad because Dad had gone to a carnival with Aunt Emily. She kept saying, 'My own sister. My own sister.' Dad yelled, too. He said he hadn't been to no carnival. Just bowling like always."

"Tuesday night?" I asked.

He looked surprised. "How'd you guess? Yeah, Tuesday's his bowling night."

Impatiently Helena interrupted us. "Michaela Cardex, tell me the point of this absurd conversation? The child clearly does not come from Arabic stock. Why do you persist in questioning him about his father?"

"A moment, Aunt," I said, my attention on the small boy. "Did they say the word carnival or affair?"

"A fair, I think," he said, frowning in concentration. "I wished he took me instead of Aunt Emily. I like roly coasters and elephants."

"When did you last see your father?" I asked.

"Maybe a week after the carnival. Aunt Emily went to help him with his bowling again. I watched TV till really late. I made popcorn in the microwave, but it got mostly burnt. Mom came home very, very tired. She smelled like old pennies. She told me Dad wasn't going to no fairs any more."

He looked at me sadly. "I guess I'll never get to see an elephant now."

"Gregory," I said. "See if this place has ice cream for our young friend here." After they left, I told Robyn to call the police, and Helena to look for a car with bloodstains on the back bumper. After they left, I slid into the seat next to the woman in red.

"I'm sorry about your sister," I said gently.

She stared at me blankly. "I meant to find her when I came;/ Death had the same design;/ But the success was his..." Her

voice trailed off. "Emily Dickinson," she whispered.

Although the air was sticky hot, I felt a chill. She spoke in an eerie monotone.

"And your husband?"

She traced X's in a pool of condensation. "I like a look of agony,/ Because I know it's true;/ Men do not sham—" She stopped abruptly and gave me a direct look. "Isn't Emily Dickinson simply wonderful? She has a poem for everything."

"A fine poet," I said carefully. "But not my style."

I caught a movement at the door and intercepted Robyn, a policeman, and Aunt Helena as they headed for us.

"Find the husband?" I asked Helena.

She nodded. "I discovered him in the trunk of a green car in the alley. From the stench, I deduced he was within. I jimmied the lid open to verify the fact." She gave the policeman a disdainful look. "This officer's partner was lily-livered. He fainted dead away. Then this one threatened to arrest me for tampering with evidence. Tell him, Michaela, whom he accuses."

"This is my Aunt Helena," I said. I motioned to the woman in wilted red. "And that is the woman responsible for the Fry Shack killings."

Weeks later, we were back to a pleasant Wisconsin summer. I lounged by Aunt Helena's pool, feeling the beriberi seep slowly from my veins. Robyn sat in the shade nearby and frowned over a laptop display of the Fry Shack case file.

"Come on, Micky, let's finish this report. Again, why did she kill them?"

"The husband, Dale Roth, had an affair with his sister-in-law, Emily Court. Ann Court Roth, his wife and Emily's sister, found out about it and killed them. The police found bloodstains on Emily's sheets. Ann probably killed them as they slept."

"Why leave pools of blood at the different Fry Shacks?"

I sighed. These were old deaths—even the tabloids weren't featuring them. My own imminent death interested me more now. At Robyn's impatient look, I hastily offered: "To draw attention away from a suspect close to the family. She used blood stolen from the blood bank where she worked. Being a statistician, she'd be inclined to use a math progression to choose the supposed murder sites. Fry Shacks were convenient, since Emily Court had worked there as a cashier."

I sipped the lemonade and meditated for a moment on the clear pool and how the sun sparkled on the water. Robyn tapped swiftly on the keyboard, wholly absorbed in her work. "I'm not sure if she mixed catsup with the blood to make a bigger pool," I continued, "or to control the spread. Maybe it was just another sign of her madness."

"Loony as a seabird," opined Robyn. I shrugged and reached for the pitcher of lemonade. "But why keep quoting from Emily Dickinson?"

I shrugged again. "Might be because the poet had the same name as her sister. We may never know."

"At least little Joey Roth will be cared for. His grandparents seem to be solid people."

"And they've promised to take him to a carnival." I yawned. "Put away the computer, Robyn, and let's talk about something more important." I patted *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia*.

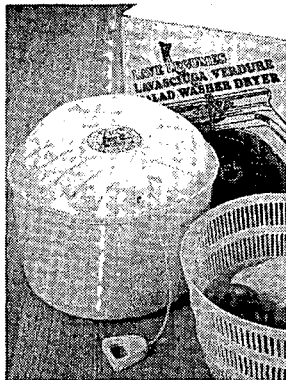
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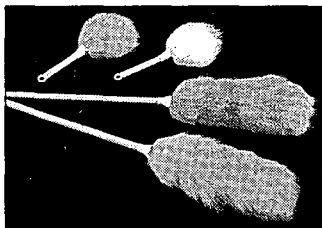


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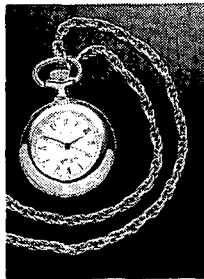
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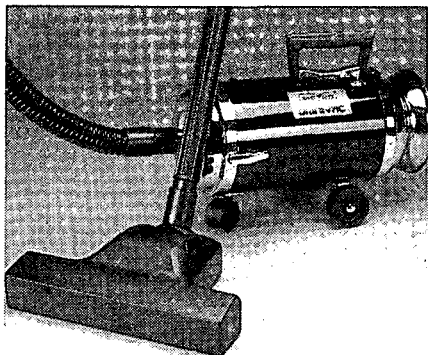
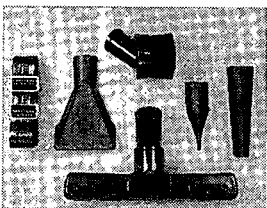
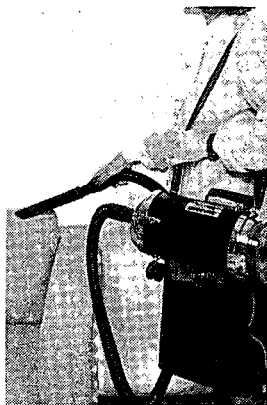
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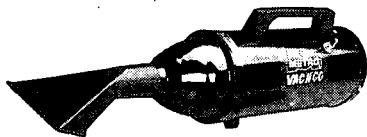
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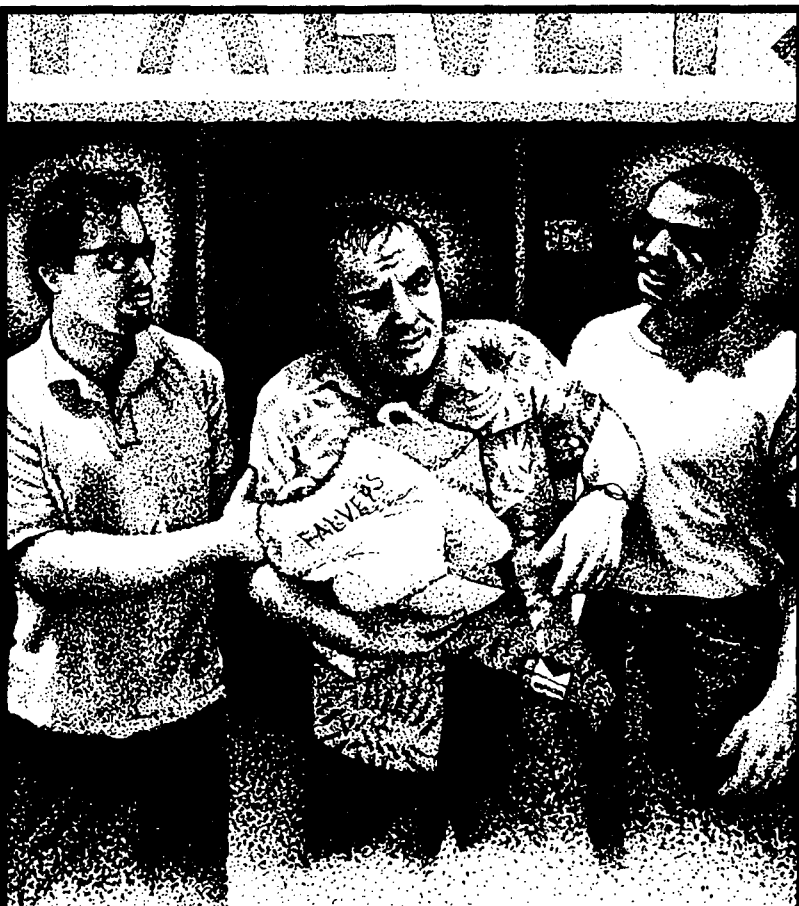
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FICTION



SHORT CONS

by Terry Courtney

Illustration by Mark Penta

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Sparky Flowers was a con man, and considering the risks inherent to his chosen profession, he was fortunate to have been blessed with the intelligence to recognize his limitations. Sparky worked short cons, in and out, slick and quick. He had long ago realized he had neither the presence, the *chutzpah*, nor the education to work long-range megabuck schemes in the grand style of a Charles Keating, Jr., a Robert Vesco, a Bernie Cornfield. No, no multimillion dollar cons for Sparky, but nevertheless he was a happy man. His current con, an invention of which he was most proud, regularly made decent money with no possibility of jail time other than the necessary and welcome two or three days once or twice a month. The high rollers sooner or later almost all went to prison for long stretches, and Sparky could do without that sort of vacation, thank you very much. He would forever be content with his minor league action.

He was content, but he often wondered whether Wendy was truly happy and content with their life. She was a great partner, surely the best he had ever had, and he would hate to lose her although he knew someday she would be gone. He had lost all the others, for that was the

nature of partners. One day, with his customary direct approach to life, Sparky simply asked her.

"Happy?" Wendy turned away from their Embassy Suite window and the view of downtown Phoenix. "Happy?" she repeated, hands on her hips, head cocked. "What a silly question. Sure I'm happy. What's not to be happy?"

Sparky was stretched out on his back on the sofa, fingers laced behind his head. He sighed. "I don't know. I keep thinking you could do better than a smalltimer like me, and someday you might think so, too. That would be a black day for me."

Wendy walked over and perched on the sliver of sofa next to Sparky's hip. "Sparky, I'm fine with us. You make out all right, like four, five, six thousand a month. One month ten large. Remember, Kansas City? We've got a super healthy nest egg in the bank in Vancouver and in both our names in case something happens to you, which is the only really thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. We live first cabin and do what we both love, namely travel all over the country. I wouldn't want it any other way. Trust me, I'm happy. Besides, I'm set for life no matter what comes down.

You've taught me all there is to know about cons." She caressed Sparky's cheek.

Sparky grinned. "Also, I'm no Robert Redford." Sparky was in fact medium tall with plain features and dark hair now beginning to thin in his fortieth year. And he fought a constant and occasionally losing battle against plumpness.

Wendy laughed, striking a pose, fluffing her hair. "Like I'm Miss America, right?" Wendy was Sparky's age, short of beautiful but certainly pretty enough. Her thick brown hair was frosted, and she still carried the same fine figure that had made her so popular in high school. Now she leaned over and kissed Sparky lightly on the forehead. "You worry too much. Think too much. Relax. We're fine."

Sparky gazed into Wendy's bright blue eyes. "I'm glad. And we will always make out all right as long as there are super-market chains and the federal government is benevolent to the Indians on their reservations."

Wendy stood up and smoothed down her skirt. "Amen. Are we working today?"

Sparky sat up, glancing at his wristwatch. "It is Monday morning. When we work, it is always Monday mornings

when the stores are nearly empty and I can be noticed. And it's time."

"Good setup?"

"Near perfect. Biggest super-market I've ever seen. That means plenty of security. The cigarettes are against the front wall, opposite the checkout stands and next to the customer service desk where some of the security people hang out. Like they designed the store with me in mind. Do you have that paper?"

"In my purse. How are the cigarettes holding out? You should still have plenty."

"Almost six cartons from the reservation in New Mexico. So, the usual. If they take me away, you leave. This afternoon call for the court date, then call the number on that paper and go see those people. Then come visit me. Ah, you know the routine."

"In my sleep I can do it, Sparky. In a coma."

Wendy parked in Falvey's large parking lot where she could watch both sets of doors and remained in the car while Sparky strolled into the store. Wendy slid down a bit on the seat, lit a cigarette, and waited.

Sparky jerked a shopping cart loose from the nested line and threaded his way among the few paid-up shoppers between the checkout stands and

the front wall. At the cigarette displays he passed the cartons to stop at the loose pack rack. With a well practiced move designed to look furtive, he glanced left and right, then took two packs of boxed Marlboro 100's from the display and dropped them on the child's seat in the cart.

Two security men, one black, the other white, both young and large, dressed casually, were lounging on either side of the customer service desk. The black man, nearer Sparky, noticed his deliberately suspicious moves and turned to make a clicking sound at his partner. The other man looked, and the first man jerked his head in the departing Sparky's direction. The second man winked, and the two men went into the store proper through a closed checkout lane. They both knew cigarettes are the most popular item among shoplifters.

Sparky's routine was well rehearsed and his timing superb. He quickly went to the far side of the store and turned into aisle one before the security men could catch up with him. In one smooth move he took the two packs of cigarettes from the cart and tossed them behind some canned goods while with the other hand he slid two identical packs of cigarettes he had

brought with him out of his trouser pocket and laid them in the seat. Then he simply shopped up and down the aisles.

The two security men were experienced and good. Each had grabbed a shopping cart. One of them was always in the aisles behind Sparky, pretending to shop, the other was always coming toward him, also dropping items into his cart. Sparky was never out of their sight, and he recognized them at once.

Sparky selected items he and Wendy could use in their travels if he was not arrested this time: aspirin, a bag of pretzels to snack on, shampoo, a bag of cookies for his sweet tooth, and to make it look authentic, a small box of instant potatoes which he would throw away if he was not stopped.

When Sparky reached the farthest aisle, lined with paper goods, he slipped the two packs of cigarettes back into the same pocket from which he had taken them and headed for the checkout stands.

As soon as Sparky walked out the front door, his purchases in a paper bag in one arm, the two security men stopped him, one holding each arm.

The man on the left said, "Excuse me, sir. You'll have to

come back into the store with us."

Sparky made a show of extricating himself from their grasp, but not too vigorously. "What is this?" he asked with a proper show of indignation. "What are you talking about? Take your hands off me."

The man on the right held up an identity card with his free hand. "We're store security, sir. Come back inside with us."

"I will not." Sparky's rising voice caught the attention of passersby. "This is outrageous."

"We don't need this nonsense," one of the guards muttered, and the two men forcibly marched Sparky back inside the store and into the manager's office behind the customer service desk.

The middle-aged manager sounded bored as he said, "What is it this time?"

"Cigarettes," the black guard replied and turned to Sparky. "Empty your pockets on the desk."

"Go to hell. Who are you to order me around?"

The guard pointed to a pocket. "Then would you mind showing us what you have in that pocket?" When Sparky didn't comply, the guard shrugged. "It's us or the police."

Sparky glanced down at the pocket in question and smiled.

"Is that what this is all about? My cigarettes are in that pocket. So what?"

"Will you please take them out and put them on the desk, sir?"

"They're only my cigarettes." Sparky pulled the two packs out and placed them on the desk, tops toward his accusers.

"Well?" the manager asked with impatience.

The white security guard said, "He took them off the rack on his way in. Over in aisle eighteen, when he thought no one could see him, he shoved them into his pocket. We both saw him do it."

Sparky thought it was all going quite nicely as he shouted, "That's a lie. I brought those packs into this store with me."

"And you always carry two unopened packs of cigarettes?" The manager's question was weighted with sarcasm.

"Sometimes. I chain-smoke. That's my business. These men are lying. I had them with me."

The manager went to the office door and turned back to look at Sparky like something he had stepped in. "You can try to sell that story to a judge. Call the police." He left.

The young policeman was courteous and obviously uninterested in the petty call. The guards told their story, Sparky his side, and the officer spread

his hands. "This is for a court to decide. Show me some identification, please."

Sparky presented his Illinois driver's license, and the policeman asked if he was in Phoenix on vacation or business.

"Vacation. I'm touring the Southwest. I only planned on being in this city two days."

The officer shook his head. "More like three or four now, depending on the court calendar. What kind of work do you do?"

"What's the difference? I'm an astronaut and you're in the middle of a big mistake."

"Right." Taking out his handcuffs the officer said, "Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

Sparky did as he was told, saying, "Good lord, handcuffs. Aren't you going to call for backup?"

After cuffing Sparky, the policeman placed the two packs of cigarettes in a clear plastic evidence bag and slid his thumb across the locking top. Sparky watched this with special interest, making certain the officer took the bag with him as he led Sparky by the arm out to his patrol car.

On the way Sparky said, "Don't you have anything more important to do, like going out and catching a crook?"

"I just did."

Sparky's bail was set at fifty dollars, and as usual he told the desk officer he could not post it. It was now Monday noon, and his court appearance was set for Thursday, nine A.M. Lovely, Sparky thought. Perfect.

The Madison Street jail was no better or worse than the countless other county jails he had been in. The first day he was locked up with two drunks who slept the day away, then shook and moaned all night. The next morning they went off to court. Sparky had been in enough courtrooms to know their sentences would be time served. After that he had the cell to himself.

Tuesday afternoon Wendy came to see him. Sparky was dressed in the powder blue jumpsuit issued to all prisoners in the county jail. They talked over telephones, separated by a thick, fine wire-meshed glass.

"How is it?" Wendy asked.

"More of the same. Did you go see those people?"

Wendy nodded. "I found a dude who pretended to be indignant at the injustice being brought down on your poor innocent head."

Sparky made a face, and Wendy returned it. Sparky said, "How much did it cost to get the sympathetic bureaucrat to help?"

"Three hundred. He's getting the court order as we speak."

"Name?"

"Peterson. He'll be in court Thursday morning. I told him you would call him at the appropriate moment."

"Good job, Wendy, as always. Look, tomorrow's Wednesday, an off day. Don't bother to come here. Enjoy yourself. See some sights. Whatever. I'll see you Thursday morning in court."

For his court appearance they allowed Sparky to wear his own clothing. As he came into the courtroom, he looked over the spectators and didn't see Wendy, which puzzled him. She was always in court for him. Sparky turned to the bench and bowed his head, impassive. The young judge with prematurely graying hair listened with a somewhat bored look on his face as the prosecutor presented the cigarettes in their plastic envelope and one of the security guards told his story, mentioning that there was a second witness present in the courtroom if necessary. Then the judge turned to Sparky. "What do you have to say, Mr. Flowers?"

Sparky raised his head and looked the judge squarely in the eyes. "What I have to say is, all you've heard so far is lies. I brought those cigarettes into the store with me. I always

carry lots of smokes. I chain-smoke."

The judge sighed. "Mr. Flowers, believe it or not, each and every time a person is caught stealing cigarettes they say the exact same thing you just said. If someone is caught stealing food or toothpaste, they can't use that one, but with cigarettes, always. Sorry, I don't buy it."

Sparky nodded. "Well, I can see I don't have a chance here, so I plead guilty as charged."

"Very well, Mr. Flowers, I..." The judge paused and frowned as a tall portly man wearing a gray business suit pushed through the railing gate and approached the bench. Sparky thought, not yet, Peterson. Bad timing, you nerd. The judge said, "Yes? What is it?"

The man gave a slight bow of his head. "My name is V. F. Harks, Your Honor. I'm an attorney with the law firm of Kelley, Mitchell and Egosque. We represent the Falvey's food chain, and we have a request for Your Honor."

"And that would be?"

"Sir, since you preside over this particular court, I'm certain you have come to realize that shoplifting has reached epidemic proportions in this county. And nationwide. Each year billions are lost to these

thieves, and it must stop. Now, we at the firm and the people at Falvey's are not so naive as to believe we can stop shoplifting, but we've come up with a plan to possibly stem the tide, so to speak. We have secured the cooperation of the local newspaper, and they intend to begin publicizing, with names and addresses, the arrest and conviction of each and every shoplifter apprehended in this county. A daily shoplifters' update if you will. Our aim is to discourage current shoplifters and those tempted in the future. Therefore, Your Honor, we respectfully request that this man and all other such thieves who come before you be given the maximum penalty allowable under the law. We must do everything possible to slow down this plague."

Sparky's mouth dropped open a little bit as he shook his head in wonderment. Lordy, how lucky could he get. The food chain lawyer actually here in the courtroom. If only it was always this easy. This was surely his day.

The judge said, "I agree, counselor. I see the endless flow of shoplifters pass through this court, and I often wonder how the stores turn a profit at all, since I know only a small percentage are caught. You will

have the cooperation of this court, sir."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

The judge looked at Sparky. "In view of your plea, Mr. Flowers, I am limited in the penalty I can impose. However, I . . ."

As the judge spoke Sparky turned to the spectators and called out, "Mr. Peterson."

The judge paused in mid-sentence as a tall young man wearing a suit and wire-rimmed glasses came forward through the railing. The judge almost scowled, his tone obviously impatient as he said, "What is it now?"

The man walked up to the bench and handed the judge a leather card case holding an identity card. "My name is Eric Peterson, Your Honor. I'm with the state Department of Revenue."

The judge glanced at the card and returned it. "And your business with this court is?"

The man took a folded document from his coat pocket and passed it to the judge. "I have a court order to confiscate the evidence in this case, sir."

"What?"

"Those cigarettes, Your Honor. My department wants them."

"For heaven's sake, why?"

"I listened to the testimony of the store security guard. Now the Department of Reve-

nue will want to talk to the Falvey people, let them babble as to why their store is selling cigarettes without the obligatory tax stamp, and then we will fine the chain fifty thousand dollars. Simple, Your Honor."

In a loud commanding voice Attorney Harks said, "Just one minute here. Let me see those cigarettes." Peterson picked them up off the table and handed them to the food chain attorney, who removed them from the envelope and turned them around in his hands.

"I'm guilty, Your Honor," Sparky said.

"No!" the lawyer shouted. "Your Honor, Falvey's would never sell illegal merchandise. Never."

The judge eyed the security guard who had testified and had now gone back to sit next to his partner among the spectators. "You heard the guard's statement. Are you saying he lied?"

"Yes. No. This must be some sort of mistake. There is no way these cigarettes were on sale on a display in Falvey's."

"I'm guilty as original sin," Sparky called out with a grin.

The judge contemplated Sparky for a moment, a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he pointed in turn to the prosecutor, Harks, Peterson, and Sparky. "You four,

in my office." He tapped his gavel. "Five minute recess."

The judge sat behind his desk and looked at each of the four men in turn, ending with Sparky. "I'm not certain just what is going on here, but I think Mr. Flowers can clear this matter up for us. Right, Mr. Flowers?"

"Yes, I can." Sparky avoided looking at Harks. That pleasure he would save for later. "I told the truth in court, Your Honor. I brought those cigarettes into the store with me for the reason I gave." He patted his hips. "You can see how snug I wear my jeans. The guards must have noticed the cigarettes bulging in my pocket and assumed anyone with two packs of smokes in a pocket must have stolen them. They stopped me and made up that story about seeing me do it. The store manager believed them, not me. The policeman who came did the same. I figured when I got here to court you would believe them, too, and you did. I knew I didn't stand a chance, but then in jail I remembered and got this idea and had a friend contact the Department of Revenue and explain the situation. It was decided to wait until my court appearance to bring out the truth to emphasize what had been done to me. Mr. Peterson here

was sympathetic enough to want to see justice done and agreed to get that court order."

"But I don't understand about the tax stamps."

"I buy my cigarettes on Indian reservations. There are no taxes on federal Indian reservations and no tax stamps are required. Cigarettes are much cheaper on reservations."

The judge, who had lived in Arizona all his life, reddened as he nodded. "Of course. I should have known. I buy my wife's cigarettes on the reservation."

"That's it then, sir. This was the only way I could see to correct this injustice. That store is clean."

The judge turned to Harks. "Counselor?"

"I accept those facts, Your Honor. Falvey's would never violate the law."

"And the security guards?"

"They will never work for Falvey's another second, and if I have my way, they will never work in security in this county again."

The judge now turned to the prosecutor. "I think you agree what has to be done."

The prosecutor simply nodded and walked out of the office as the judge said, "Back in court."

On his way back to the front of the bench Sparky looked over the gallery again. Still no

Wendy. She never missed. Oh well, maybe this was the day. Yes, sooner or later.

The judge settled down behind the bench and said, "In view of further evidence I find the defendant not guilty. Next case."

Sparky followed Harks out of the courtroom. In the corridor the lawyer turned and offered his hand. Sparky ignored it. The attorney said, "Mr. Flowers, on behalf of Falvey's I apologize for what happened to you. You have my word those two guards will get what is coming to them. Again, our apologies."

Sparky laughed. "You apologize? How sweet. You apologize. I just spent three days and three sleepless nights in the county jail for no reason, and you apologize." Sparky hauled out his buzz words. "It was a gruesome experience, Harks. I believe nightmarish is the operative word here. And you think you can wipe the slate clean with an apology. I think not. When I leave here, I am going to retain a local attorney and sue your client for big bucks. Really big bucks. And since I am on vacation, it will be done immediately, like tomorrow. Oh yes, back in court you mentioned publicity in the newspapers. I'm going to instruct my lawyer to use whatever influence he or she has

with the local papers to get this story in print. Your apology be damned, Harks. You're talking down to the wrong man."

The lawyer held up both hands, palms outward. "Mr. Flowers, I don't think that will be necessary. I'm certain Falvey's will want to do the correct thing." He took a business card from his breast pocket and offered it to Sparky. "Will you come to my office this afternoon, say about three? I think we can conclude this affair at that time to your satisfaction."

Sparky palmed the card. "All right, I'll be there. But don't even think about shortchanging me, Harks. You tried to talk down to me once today. Don't make that mistake again."

When Sparky returned to his Embassy Suite, the first thing he saw was the envelope propped against the pillow. He sighed. Wendy was gone. He had known it back in court.

He sat on the bed, and as he read the letter written on hotel stationery, a sad smile played with his mouth. Poor Wendy. He hoped she had saved some money. Vancouver was no place to be stranded broke.

Sparky went to the lawyer's office at three, blustered on cue, and finally accepted a check for five thousand dollars. He cashed the check on the way

back to the hotel and kept all the cash. No bank deposit this time. He would need it all to spread around impressing potential partners.

When the drink arrived from room service, he read Wendy's letter again.

Dear Sparky,

They say all good things must come to an end. Too true. We had a good run, love. Three and a half years, but now it's time for Wendy to make it on her own. I've thought up two great cons to work by myself. I have to try, and I think you'll understand. I have to see if I'm as good as I think I am.

Tomorrow, Wednesday morning, I'm flying to Vancouver to close our account. I need all that money to get started, but you'll be all right. You make money any time you want.

Please don't hate me because of the money. In a way it's just how we kept score. And thanks for everything, especially the education.

*Love,
Wendy*

Sparky sipped his drink, smiling sadly. Dumb Wendy.

She had said he had taught her all there was to know about cons. A good con man never did that. He had taught her *almost* all there was to know about cons. Sparky had closed the Vancouver bank account two weeks after it was opened in both their names. That account was only a device to keep Wendy around as long as possible while she thought the balance was growing and growing. After that first two weeks, all the deposits she believed were going to Vancouver were actually going to his regular bank in Toronto. He had used that ploy with all his partners. Well, maybe Wendy would come out all right. She had a few good things going for her. He didn't hate her or even dislike her. True, she had intended to steal his money, but then he wasn't exactly Honest Abe himself. Sparky dismissed her from his mind. She was now just another ex-partner. He decided to change his plans. Tucson had been his next destination, but now he thought Reno was his best bet. He needed a new partner, and there were more women at loose ends in Reno than anywhere he had ever been. Yes, next stop Reno.

Sparky went out that evening for his customary celebration after a score. He enjoyed a good dinner and fine bottle of

wine. When he returned to the hotel, he realized he was not at all tired and decided to push on to Reno that night. He checked out of the hotel and stowed his bags in the car trunk. As he closed the trunk lid, something hard pressed against his spine, and a quiet voice at his ear said, "No sudden moves, Flow-ers." Sparky looked over his shoulder into the face of the white security guard from Falvey's.

The quickness of what happened dazed Sparky. The guard marched him to a nearby car where the black guard was sitting behind the wheel. He was shoved into the back seat, and the guard with the gun sat next to him, the revolver jammed against the side of his neck. Several times during the ride he tried to speak, and the command to shut up was emphasized by the gun jabbing into his flesh. In time the driver turned down a lonely road and then onto a gravel path dividing a huge orange grove. A hundred yards into the dark grove the car stopped, and Sparky was prodded in among the trees. The guard with the gun stood at his side, the weapon pressed against his temple. The other guard stood in front of him, allowing room for quick moves.

The black guard said, "You look surprised, dirtbag. Didn't it ever occur to you that somewhere along the line the victims of your scam would take offense and come to see you about it?"

And it now occurred to Sparky that no, that had never occurred to him.

The guard at his side said, "We're both family men. We've lost our jobs, and we're blackballed in the security business in this entire state. It's all we know. It's what we do best. Now, thanks to you, we have to move our families to another state."

And suddenly it occurred to Sparky that now and then he had thought his best move would be to get the money and leave town immediately. But he really enjoyed his little vic-

tory celebrations. "Do you want money?" he asked in a raspy voice. "I can give you lots of money. All I need is to get to a bank. Any bank."

The black guard said, "You're too slippery for that, man. No bank. We can't let you be around people. You're an eel."

The man at his side said, "No, this is it. You must have heard. What goes around comes around."

Sparky heard the revolver hammer click back and a great sadness overcame him as it occurred to him that perhaps he had been fooling himself all along. Maybe he, like Wendy, only knew *almost* all there was to know about cons.

Sparky never heard the shot. And nothing else occurred to him.

Ever again.

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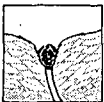
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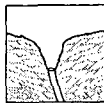
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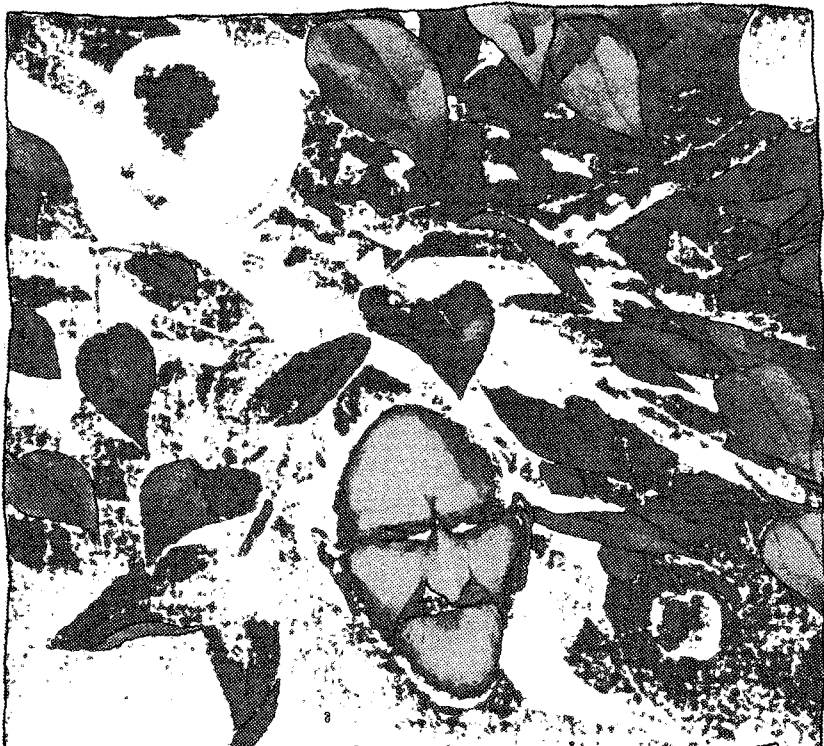


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FICTION



Pick and Grim

by Michael Shea

Illustration by Jim Adams

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Crabbe is a big guy in an expensive striped polo shirt, sitting surrounded by a computer, laser-printer, fax machine, copier, and state-of-the-art phone system. This isle of technology is cornered in the parlor of an 1890's farmhouse that is otherwise still furnished according to its era. Everywhere is the mellow, polished look of furniture maintained by generations of women with wood oil and wax. Crabbe pours hard cider on the ice in his glass, drinks, settles back in his recliner, and resumes his remarks to the phone-box. "The long and short of it, Ralph, is that the cider figures are fine but the hard cider figures suck. Now, you're the salesman here, Ralph, you need me to tell you that?"

"Mr. Crabbe, I am quite frankly doing my darndest. I'm going to be honest with you, Mr. Crabbe. It's the label. It's basically an image problem."

Crabbe looks at the label in question on his bottle of hard cider. There is a grandmotherly woman, cameoed in the bannered motto "The earth is a garden God gives us to keep. As we have sown, so shall we reap" and emblazoned "Miss Crabbe's Pure Country Hard Cider."

Crabbe's jaw takes a fierce set, but there seems to be a hint

of humor around his eyes; it is hard to be sure, as these are grey, flinty little eyes that glint with contempt. "Do you believe, Ralph," he says, measured and solemn, voice rising little by little, "that I'd change this label? That with my beloved sister lying paralyzed in her bed this year and more, I would even contemplate a change like that in the way she loved to do things?" Then he sits, smiling outright now, enjoying the silence in which Ralph fails to say, *Except for the change of bringing out hard cider—of bringing out any kind of alcoholic beverage—in the first place.* Prudent Ralph merely allows a beat of silence and returns to his point.

"The problem is, Mr. Crabbe, that the yuppie liquor and grog shops and wine and spirits places where small labels make money, well, places like these have trouble with something rustic like hard cider in the first place. And frankly this, ah, folksy label just aggravates that reaction. They back off from it."

Crabbe, still having fun, keeps his voice stern. "Ralph, when I sit by my beloved sister Reba's bed each morning for our little chat before I get to the day's business, I make her a promise. I can't even know if she hears me at all, of course,

but I renew that promise every day. The traditional family label she always loved and insisted on will always mark our products, however we may broaden and diversify. Now, you listen up, Ralph. This is something I shouldn't have to tell any salesman worth a damn: people will buy any goddamned thing you tell them to buy. Just tell your yuppie buyers that if they've got the balls to break the mold people will flock to them. Just get out there and motivate, willya, Ralph?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Crabbe."

Crabbe gets up and stretches, smiling slightly. He crosses the parlor to the door of his older sister Reba's bedroom and shoves it open. To her empty, neatly made bed he hoists his glass and drinks a toast. "You *sure* you won't try a taste of hard now, Reba? Well, okay!" He drinks and smacks his lips. "One thing I can promise you, though, old girl: like it or not, your precious label is gonna be on every goddamned bottle. Hee hee hee!"

Crabbe smiles out to the pressing barn. This structure is a big three-walled shed really that houses the great cider press and all the ladders and baskets and tools appropriate to a large apple orchard. Crabbe has another La-Z-Boy out here, with a spacious end

table for drinking paraphernalia on one side of it and a little refrigerator humming on the concrete slab on the other side of it. He settles into the chair, takes up the cordless phone, and punches a number. He hears four rings while he builds another cider on ice and takes a sip from it.

When the receiver is lifted at the other end, Crabbe hears a lot of background noise, slamming doors and kids' voices and yapping dogs accompanying the twangy reply: "Toad's Haulin' an' Repairs, Jim Toad speakin'."

"Can't you read a calendar, Toad?"

"Oh, Lord have mercy, Mr. Crabbe! Can't I slide on the pickin' till week's end? I'm up on my rent, and we're terrible tight for cash, an' I got a little haulin' lined up just—"

"If you and your brats want to keep living in the house, you'll be here in half an hour. Come straight to the barn, I'm at the press."

Jimmy Toad's battered Ford pickup clatters up to the barn twenty minutes later. He jumps out, a lean, twitchy, ferret-featured man in baggy overalls. Out of the overalls' bib pocket sticks the bent antenna of a cheap old transistor. Faint gospel music leaks out,

and from time to time his hand dips in to fiddle with the dials.

Crabbe tells him, "I want you to get just the first few ripe ones from each tree—they make the best cider for my private stock. Now, get this. Go everywhere but the south corner. I broke up the ground there to let the roots breathe, and I'm gonna let the apples drop and mulch there another season. So." Crabbe holds up two fingers and ticks them off. "Only the ripe ones, and don't pick the south corner. You got that clear, Toad?"

Toad nods vigorously. He brings a slightly smudged envelope out of the same pocket that holds the radio. "Me an' the wife got this feel-better card for Mrs. Crabbe. She was always so sweet to me when I was growin' up. Could I maybe give it to her my own self?"

"No!" Crabbe snaps. After a beat he realizes he has overreacted. "She needs rest. Thanks, though." He takes the card, then has a thought that makes him smile. "Now remember, I'm always willing to reward good work. You bring me enough bushels, and you can split a bottle of my private stock with me."

Toad shifts on his feet, very nervous. "Well, you know, I never touch strong drink. . . . I feel just like Miz Crabbe does

about it, sir. I'm much obliged all the same—"

He has been fiddling unthinkingly with the radio in his bib pocket, and a preacher's voice blares out: "—and not for nothing is it written, friends, that as ye sow, so also shall ye reap!"

The volume makes them both jump. "Turn that damn thing down!" Crabbe roars. "Get to work!"

Climbing up his three-legged picking ladder into yet another cloud of apple boughs and leaves, sweat running down his face and his canvas shoulder-pouch half full, Toad has reached the aerobic trance of the seasoned worker, his hands automatic and sure. He is one of those people who talks to himself in this state. Pausing before pouching a particularly fine apple he has picked, he eyes it reminiscently. "I remember when you caught me sneakin' apples here, Miz Crabbe, when I was a kid. 'Jimmy,' you said, 'you got no call to come sneakin'.' You had me scared, Miz Crabbe, looking so tall an' grim. 'You got no call,' you said, 'cause any time you want one of my apples, you can walk right in an' take it.' " Toad takes a bite of this apple and chews it thoroughly, eyes half closing. Swallowing, he

says—voice lower, carefuller —“These are your trees, Miz Crabbe, willed straight from your momma. They ain’t *his* trees.”

As he finishes consuming the apple in large, expert bites, his radio gets a surge of signal-strength. A preacher’s voice is segueing between songs: “... but before we can *take* that stroll in the Garden of Paradise, fellow Christians, we must all come face to face with that Gatekeeper, grim and terrible, whose name is... Death!”

A bluegrass funeral song follows, with slow banjos and a gloomy, reedy chorus:

*Oh-oh De-eath
Caintya spare me over
To a-no-ther ye-ar?*

But then the radio gives an almost explosive crackle. Toad’s hand dips to the knobs, but the knobs have no effect. The voice of an elderly woman cries sharply, at frightening volume, “That axe in your hands don’t change my mind, Henry! Dear God, I see what you are now. Forgive me, Lord, that I’ve been blind, fool-blind, all these many years!”

“Miz Crabbe!” Toad gasps.

Mr. Crabbe barks from the radio in answer to his sister. “I’ve been the fool, you Bible-pounding hag! Letting you sit on a gold mine and refusing to

work it! Well, I’ve put in my time, and I won’t hang around rotting any longer. You can rot now, Reba! *You* can rot now!”

“Hoist it high as you want, Swine of Satan!” Her shrill voice is like steel, like battle trumpets; Toad feels the radio buzz with its force, sending a pang of heat through his heart. “I don’t cringe before the Devil’s spawn!” trumpets Reba Crabbe. “Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of—”

A horrible, meaty impact blots her voice. Deep groans of agony are punctuated by a grunting butcher’s noise. Toad groans and winces and cries aloud as he loses balance and topples from his ladder.

Toad awakes lying with his cheek on the grass. It’s chillier, and he can see a faint smoke of mist rising among the trunks of the trees. An odd midmorning fog seems to be moving across the orchard. He hears—quite near—the crackle of the radio and sharply lifts his face from the earth. He rises to his elbow. The radio is right next to him. He is gingerly reaching toward it when it speaks to him in the voice of Reba Crabbe.

“Jimmy? Jimmy Toad?”

His terror and his grief are equally strong. Tears jump from his eyes. Miz Crabbe can be doing this only if she is in the spirit world, Toad is sure. Only if she is dead! "Dear God!" he moans.

"You were always a sweet boy, Jimmy," the ghostly radio voice tells him. "Simple, God knows, but good-hearted and upright in the sight of the Lord."

"Miz Crabbe! Where . . . ? Are you . . . ?"

"I'm all right, Jimmy. God holds me in his hands like you hold this radio because all my life I loved and cherished Him and was a faithful steward of His bounty. But today, this day of my brother's first pressing, I must have your help, Jimmy. I need you to gather a special part of this year's harvest down in the south corner."

"That's just where Mr. Crabbe said not to pick . . ."

"Take my brother what you have gathered so far. He will be celebrating. Drink with him."

"Miz Crabbe! Drink with him? Dear Lord, I could never —"

"Drink with him for the love of God, and remember that nothing that comes from my trees will harm you or cloud your mind. . . ."

Crabbe stands by the press

and has Toad dump his bushels into it. He is enjoying Toad's nervousness. The bumpkin is plainly terrified that Crabbe will tempt him with alcohol again.

"They look like good pickings," Crabbe says. He takes up the oil can from the little loading platform, gives the press works a shot, and hits the button. The great oaken drum groans mellowly with the thrust of the mighty hydraulics. The clear four inch outtake pipe at the press's base is filled with a surge of golden juice.

"Now, come here and have a drink with me, Toad," Crabbe says, going to the table. "You earned it. I think it's downright hostile in a man to refuse a friendly drink like this—"

"All right, sir. Just one I guess won't hurt." The words come out slightly run together after nervous, silent practice. Crabbe's jaw drops; then he laughs, confirmed in his long belief that teetotallers are secret cravers bound by cowardice.

"Now you're talking!" he says. He pours two tumblers; with delight he watches Toad's expected shudder of disgust when he gulps his first. "Lord God!" gasps Toad unguardedly. "That's as vile as they said it'd be! How can you *swallow* this,

Mr. Crabbe?" He can be seen to recover himself slightly. "But a course if yer havin another it's only polite to keep ya company."

Crabbe displays delight. There is a naive challenge in the acceptance that he finds himself rising to. Again he pours both their glasses brimful. "Now yer talkin', Toad! Down the hatch!"

The cider is the Select Press, twelve percent alcohol. After the third brimming glass he is piqued to see no stagger in Toad's stance. "With all due respect, Mr. Crabbe, it's kinda funny they call this *strong* drink. I mean, it *tastes* awful, but it don't seem to *do* nothin', though."

"Well, this isn't the strong stuff, Jimmy." Crabbe is nettled and finds that he lurches slightly as he leans to the little cabinet and takes out the Black Label Crabbe's Farm Apple Brandy, eighty-six proof. Crabbe's dander is up—he pours two equally full glasses, bound he'll whip this wimp straight out. Toad drains his tumbler at a breath and yelps with astonishment. "Dear Jesus but that's awful! But—" Toad takes a few steps back and forth, leans over backward, stands on one foot "—even this stuff don't seem particularly *strong*."

After the fourth brimming tumbler of brandy, Crabbe, thinking he will lean forward to reach a new bottle, topples out of his chair onto the floor. He makes a spastic little effort to rise and then lies still, emitting, after a moment, a deep snore.

The unusual fog is thicker down in the south corner. Toad's truck inches between trees draped in rags of mist, his tires' crackle sounding crisp as cricket-noise in the dark air. His hand dips to the knobs of the radio. He has already found it dead on all stations, breathing out only static, but he tries anyway. "Miz Crabbe? Miz Crabbe? Lord, I don't know where to start . . ."

The radio gasps, or whispers something. He takes it out and shakes it. It gives another gasp of static in which is embedded a single ragged word: "... choose . . ."

He gets out. He sets his ladder to the nearest tree. Mounting into its branches, he feels a delicate, frightening resistance in the tendrils of mist, a little like cotton candy, or cobweb. He peers through the cloud of foliage. This is his hundredth tree today, yet this one seems an utterly alien microworld, hung with a harvest of unimaginable fruit.

He is peering at long focus, and when he recognizes the blurred thing that dangles just inches from his nose, he almost falls again. He grips a branch just in time and groans with fear and pity.

It is a tiny arm that hangs from a living stem, the arm black and shrivelled and no bigger than a doll's. Toad finds more tears for Reba Crabbe and is past being startled by the gasp of the radio. "... Pick it... five more... pick them all..."

It is getting late in the day. Toad is frightened when he realizes it—hours are gone, and he is not yet done. His grief is wept out after harvesting five of these strange fruit—though finding her torso, with its tiny withered breasts, and five cruel stumps, brought him fresh tears. But now the most important remains. As he hesitates with his ladder between trees, it seems he hears a whisper from one of them.

Climbing into the boughs, he finds her little shriveled-apple head at once. The eyes are sealed. Though wasted and darkened, it is unmistakably Reba Crabbe's beloved face in miniature. He plucks the ghastly little talisman and holds it between his fingers. His pity comes back—until ter-

ror takes its place when the tiny eyes open and glint like obsidian and the tiny shriveled lips begin to whisper to him.

Glowering from his recliner now, Crabbe again watches Toad off-load bushels (hastily picked in the last hour of failing light) and stack them near the press. Crabbe has been conscious for a while, has been walking around drinking coffee, sobering up, a bruised fighter burning for a rematch. His head isn't totally clear yet. He realizes with some surprise that night has fallen and the crickets are shrilling up a storm.

"You've done just fine, Toad." The amiable note Crabbe tries for is extremely flat. "But I gotta say I don't consider a man's drunk with me without tastin' the Especial!"

He pours two brimming tumblers of his Especial, one hundred fifteen proof apple brandy intended strictly for private consumption. Toad almost jumps at his voice. "Just one more bushel I gotta bring in, Mr. Crabbe." His nervousness seems extreme—he sets the last bushel down out of sight behind the stacks of the others before coming over and accepting one of the glasses. "Well," Toad says with a nervous giggle. "Bottoms down the

hatch!" He is now prepared for the foul taste and slams the whole drink down in one cringing breath to shorten his discomfort. "Whooeee! Mr. Crabbe, I gotta say that's prime awful foul tastin' stuff! I sure admire you for bein' able to suck it down all day long like you do."

Crabbe studies him bleakly. The God-fearing fieldhand seems strangely on edge, sweating hard for the cool night: his nerves seem sharpened if anything. And he has just downed what works out to about four inches of pure alcohol. Because Crabbe himself is not fully sober it takes him a moment, but finally Toad's sobriety makes him mad. He chugalugs his own tumblerful and has to gasp in his turn in spite of himself. When he has his voice, he gestures Toad fiercely away. "So go home! Goodnight! Come help the Mexes next Monday with the rest."

A frail shred of gospel music banners behind Toad as he hastens to his truck: . . . *circle, be un-bro-oken* . . .

Crabbe stands, very slightly teetering left, tottering right, listening to the old pickup rattle away in the dark. Two apples jump out of the bushels Toad has just stacked near the press and come tumbling a few

crooked feet toward him. "Ssssst!" he hisses, cat-noise to scare rats. He hurries indignantly to the apples—his private press apples not laid in the barn two minutes and the bold vermin are already on them!

He finds a half full bushel basket set back in the shadow of the others, lying on its side. He regathers the spill and takes this up to the press platform, powers open the lid, and dumps the apples in. Let the rats follow the fruit in there if they were so goddamned greedy. He'll press what Toad has just brought in, fill another barrel and make a good day's work of it. As he steps off the platform, he hears a dry, scuttling little noise. A single apple jumps off a bushel and bumps across the floor, crossing his path.

It's as if the rats are challenging him. Crabbe is so astonished at the notion he forgets to be outraged for a moment. "Ssssst! Geddouda—here ya fuggin' rat! Geddouda—here!"

And then there is another tiny dry scuttling noise. Or is it . . . whispering? He leaps toward the bushels, sudden with fear, but stumbles. He regains his balance and snatches up the bushel the errant apple came from. He discovers no vermin.

When he dumps this much fuller basket into the press, he almost loses his balance and falls in after it.

But he gets his rhythm. Another bushel. Then another. As he goes for a fourth one, the oil can on the loading platform moves. Its slender spout swings round, and its handle is squeezed repeatedly with a tiny squeaking sound that the noise of Crabbe's grunting keeps him from hearing. A little puddle of oil grows on the loading platform.

Crabbe is starting to burn some of the hundred fifteen proof fuel, beginning to feel gusto in a little musclework. He mounts the platform and heaves the apples in, and just as he does so, he hears his name spoken in a whispery-crackly little voice the size of a rat's: "Hen-reee!"—and at the same instant, his feet squirt out from under him and, still keeping his grip on the bushel, he follows the apples down into the press.

The apples his head and shoulders slam into seem only slightly softer than cobblestones. It is as if the blow has hammered his whole day's quota of alcohol up into his brain at once. He is so woozy it seems impossible to right himself. He wriggles and moans and grunts, and gets his back a

bit more under him, his head up again, but he is still folded in a V, hips downmost on the apples, unable to manuever his drinker's bulk in the narrow diameter of the press. There is something absolutely terrifying about the stainless steel smoothness of this pressing chamber that hugs him so tightly.

"Hen-ry-y-y."

Crabbe looks up—it makes his neckbones pop, but he does it. Leaning over the rim of the press, little more than a yard above him, is a little doll-sized head. The rack of fluorescents up among the barn's rafters backlights the head, hiding the face, but the wisps of hair that surround it, that slightly touseled corona of stray hair escaping a tight and churchly coil of braids—by God, Crabbe would know that halo of hair anywhere!

"Jesus God in Heaven," he shrieks, the shriek gurgling in his kinked throat. He means these pious words as curses, every one of them, furious repudiations of this Bible-pounding bitch who has devoured his life, who has stolen from him all his years of possible Porsches and pumped-up blondes. All that stolen, and now his life itself! "Jesus Christ God in Heaven, Reba!" he shrieks in rage transcendent.

"You sowed, Henry," her little rat-voice says, the same old bullying, arrogant piety in it, though miniaturized, "and this is the harvest. Now you shall reap."

From this angle Crabbe can just see the red and black power buttons in their box, bolted to a stanchion. The red button is the one that puts the press through its crush sequence. When the head disappears from the rim of the press, Crabbe starts fighting to un-wedge himself. But not two seconds later he sees a little hand press against the red button—the whole span of this hand is only slightly wider than the button—and shove it home. The familiar hum of the hydraulics is very unfamiliar heard from down in here. The press's great lid, a mighty piston, closes down so promptly, so much faster than it ever seemed to move before. The air is crushed first and Crabbe's eardrums blow inward, tiny prefaces of pain that precede by a millisecond the one-stroke mulching of his bones and meat.

A short time later the big tabby cat, so long pampered by Reba Crabbe that not a year of her brother's kicks and curses have driven it off, pads into the press barn. The cat freezes,

suddenly intent, at finding a prey-sized thing openly at work by the casks that are filled from the press. The thing, a tiny, naked, shriveled woman, turns and regards the cat, arms akimbo. The beast, more than a tiger in size to her, utters a purring yodel of greeting that ends on a rising, interrogative note, then rolls on the concrete and voluptuously rubs his back against it, in pleased anticipation of having its stomach stroked.

To reach the spigot of the cask, the withered feminuncula stands on an empty bottle from Crabbe's drinking table; she levers down a stream of the pressing into the glass she has positioned below. The stream is a rich gold-red as it falls. A moment later, she hugs the glass and sinks her parched face into the beverage of blood and cider.

Toad pulls up at the barn just after sunrise next morning. The lid of the press stands open. A pail and a mop are on the platform. He steps from the truck. He is trembling. His arms are crossed over his chest as if protecting his heart, or his radio. From inside the press shrills out a voice as sharp and tart as a Jonathan apple on a cold morning. "Is that you, Jimmy Toad?"

Reba Crabbe climbs out of the press in a faded old work dress Toad knows as well as one of his own wife's. She has dirt smudges on face and arms and is holding a cleaning rag. Toad stands right where he is, his body softly trembling, his ferret-nosed yet guileless face drinking in a mystery, drinking in, like ambrosia, the justification of his entire way of life.

"Jimmy," says Reba Crabbe briskly, "last night I wrote up the quitclaim deed to that house you're in. You own it now, and the five acres it stands in the middle of. Your salary's tripled; you're the or-

chard manager. There's your salary retroactive for a year." She points to the table by the recliner, utterly bare now of all save an envelope.

"Now shake the flies off, Jimmy, and look sharp. Go see the pickers an' tell 'em next Monday, sunup sharp!"

"Yes, ma'am!" He darts forward and grabs up the envelope. As he hurries back to his truck, she calls after him.

"I'm grieved to have to tell you my brother Henry suffered a tragic stroke last night, and he's taken to his bed. It's not likely he'll rise from it again. The poor man don't have much faith in the Lord."

FICTION

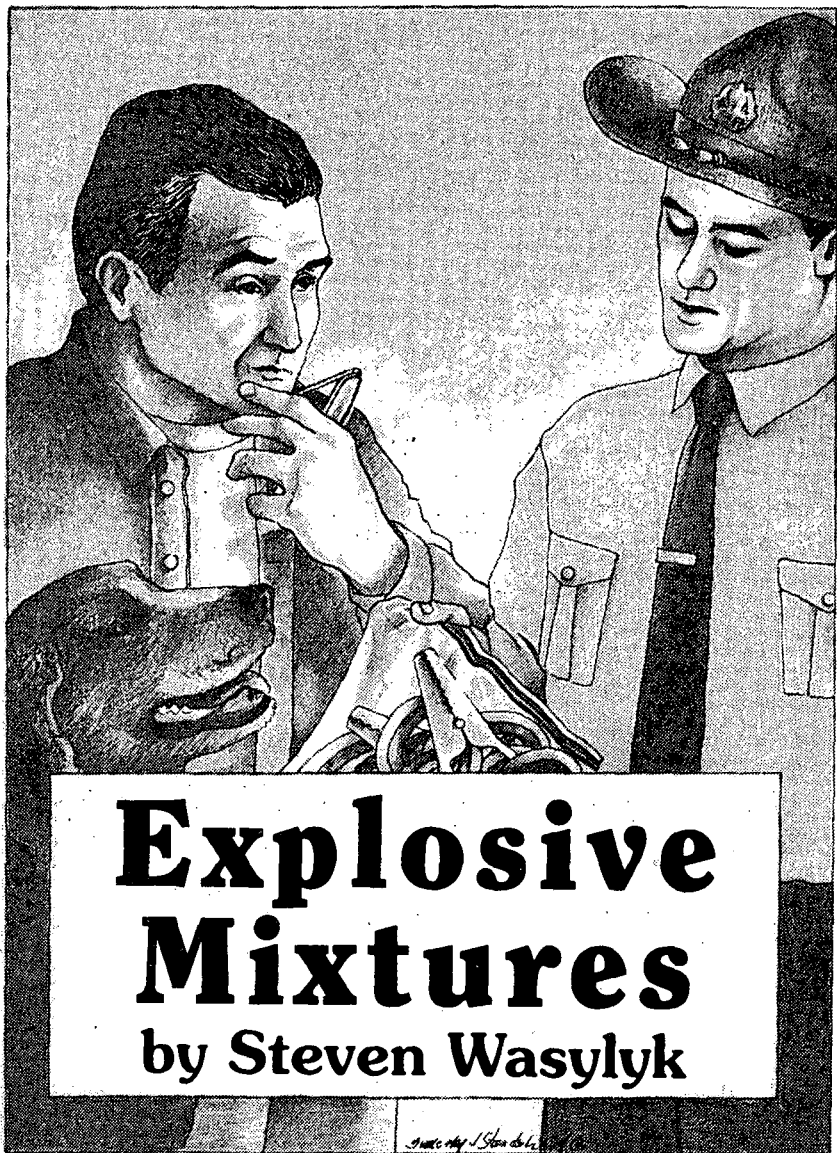


Illustration by Tim Standish

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The thud of the closing car door snapped John Henry's big black head up, ears cocked, followed a split second later by a scrambling charge at the back door with tail wagging furiously.

Hoping to escape to his workshop before he lost any more time on Adele Marvelo's wedding gift clock, Barney rose and gulped down the rest of his mid-morning coffee. "Tell whoever it is that I ran off with the church secretary who wears those lowcut blouses."

"Oh, sit down." Edna placed another cup and saucer on the table. "It's Corcoran. He's the only one who sets John Henry's tail in high gear. Whatever he wants, remember the lawn needs mowing. The neighborhood may be deteriorating, but that doesn't mean this property has to."

"Edna, that small apartment house across the street really didn't turn it into a slum, you know."

"Didn't skyrocket property values, either."

Corcoran rattled the aluminum screen door. "May I come in?"

"Haven't been able to keep you out yet," said Edna.

Corcoran scratched an ecstatic John Henry's ears.

"If you paid that kind of attention to Edna," said Barney,

"she might welcome you more warmly."

Edna smiled sweetly. "Reach for my ears and you're dead, Corcoran. What trouble are you going to get Barney into today? After you showed up three months ago, he wrecked a police car and limped for a month. Then you drafted him into playing the part of the butler for the Neighborhood Players' Group. A thirty second walk-on with a tray and he falls over his own feet leaving the stage and sprains his wrist."

Six feet of tan uniform with a badge on the chest and three stripes on the sleeve guiltily turned eyes away from five two of precisely coiffed, grayhaired, white-bloused, blue-slacked frostiness.

Barney grinned. Edna didn't know it yet, but he'd signed up for the Players' fall production, whatever it might be. He'd stumbled through the butler's role as a favor to Corcoran after the original cast member came down with the flu, but even though he'd felt like a penguin in the butler's tails, he'd been caught up in the excitement and tension backstage and wanted more.

"Not his fault," he said. "Just pour the man's coffee."

Edna poured. John Henry rested his chin on Corcoran's thigh. "Feel free to slobber on

his uniform, John Henry," said Edna.

Barney chuckled. "If she didn't like you, she wouldn't harass you, Corcoran. What's on your mind?"

Corcoran sipped and held up his cup. "Best in the county."

"Thank Mr. Braun," snapped Edna. "Get to the point. What do you want from this geriatric Sam Spade?"

"Just a little advice is all," said Corcoran. "You may not know Harry Wilde personally, Barney, but you must have noticed him at council meetings. Left arm missing below the elbow."

"Doesn't seem to slow him down."

"Sure doesn't. He runs a custom metal specialties shop along the creek behind the Marlborough Shopping Center. Doing well, I suppose, because he added a wing to the building. Day before yesterday, an electrician named Jimmy Hayden was electrocuted doing a little work there."

"Oh dear," said Edna.

"Seems to be an accident," said Corcoran.

Barney set his cup down. "Seems to be?"

"Well, yeah. Dutch Gerbach, the guy he worked for, says he can name a half-dozen blank brains who might kill themselves accidentally, but Hay-

den was too experienced and a safety fanatic to boot. Mind you, nothing says otherwise, and maybe I should forget it, but Dutch reminds me a little of you, Barney. The two of you are a pair."

"Is that supposed to be good?" asked Edna.

"What I mean, Edna, is the two of them are the only ones I know who have the guts to do things the way they ought to be done, no matter what. You see, it's one thing if Hayden caused his own death. But if he was a victim of some sort, it's another. Could leave anyone open to a fat lawsuit by Hayden's wife, so it would pay Dutch to leave well enough alone, especially since there is no evidence to the contrary."

"Hold on," said Barney. "Didn't anyone see what happened?"

"Hayden was alone. He'd called Dutch and told him that if he put in about an hour of overtime, he could finish part of the job and go on to another in the morning, if it was all right. The apprentice with him couldn't stay, but installing receptacles isn't a two-man job anyway. Dutch said okay, so Hayden went out to his van to get the receptacles."

Corcoran shook his head. "Funny how these things come together. Normally, the most

110 volts will do is bounce you across the room and convince you to double your contribution the next time you go to church, unless you have a weak heart or are exceptionally well grounded. Like taking a bath when your wife drops her hair dryer into the tub."

"Didn't one do that recently?" asked Edna.

"That clever lady's trial comes up in the fall, Edna. So even if he did make a mistake, Hayden's penalty should have been nothing more than a good shock. But it rained that day and he'd just come in from the van. His clothes were wet, and he was standing on a cement slab in direct contact with the earth about fifty feet from a creek with no one handy to give him CPR."

Edna refilled his cup.

"Only Hayden and Wilde were left in the building. Wilde was in the office at the front waiting for Hayden to finish so he could lock up. Too far away to hear anything. When he didn't show in an hour, he went to look for him. Too late, of course."

"You still haven't told me why you're here," said Barney.

"All of us lose our concentration occasionally and do something dumb. Most of the time we get away with it. How many times have you almost lost a

finger running those wood-working machines of yours because your mind was elsewhere?"

"Bite your tongue!" snapped Edna.

"Just giving you the anatomy of accidents, Edna. Now, everyone thinks that's what happened to Hayden. Except Dutch. He says he can't even figure out *how* it happened. The trouble is, I'm not that knowledgeable about electricity, and he rattles on like an instructor in an advanced class at Vo-Tech, so it's like he's speaking a foreign language. You know more than I do about that stuff, and I'm hoping that microchip brain of yours can come up with something."

"You're saying his boss can't see how the man electrocuted himself?"

"What I'm saying is that he insists it couldn't have happened the way it appears it did."

Considering that his blue vans carried the legend "Since 1962," Dutch's opinion couldn't be dismissed. Sounded interesting enough to put off the lawn mowing for a few hours and the clockmaking into evening.

Barney rose. "Talking never hurt anyone."

"Ha," said Edna. "I can name a dozen people who said the wrong thing at the wrong time,

including me, but I've never heard of anyone getting into trouble keeping his mouth shut."

Barney pointed at John Henry. "Stay."

John Henry's head drooped as they walked out.

Edna scratched his ears. "There they go, John Henry. As the paper once said, an unlikely pair if you ever saw one. The elderly, balding, rotund amateur sleuth and his friend, the tall, handsome Sergeant Corcoran."

John Henry's ears lifted at the name.

Edna sighed. "I swear, you ungrateful mutt, if Barney and I dropped dead, you'd walk off with Corcoran and never look back."

John Henry punished her heresy by resting his chin on her thigh and slobbering on her new slacks.

"Edna seems a bit more testy than usual," said Corcoran as they pulled away from the curb.

"Her tulips came in second at the flower show this year. She blames it on the apartment house—" Barney jerked a thumb at the ugly four story brick building across the street "—cutting off the sun for a few hours each day. If you get a call some night about a grayhaired,

fashionably dressed woman attacking a brick building with a sledge hammer, you'll know who it is. Dutch questioning the cause of death?"

"No. The preliminary says he was electrocuted, all right. What Dutch doesn't buy is an experienced, safety-conscious electrician making a mistake so bad it killed him. He can't come up with an explanation, but then he's not what I'd call a creative thinker."

Five minutes later Corcoran drove down a curving road at the rear of the shopping center to the parking lot in front of a small, flat, weathered, cinder block building.

To the right and at the top of a thirty foot slope, the rear of the shopping center complex loomed. To the left at the foot of another slope a creek trickled along a stony bed, a steep, wooded bank on the other side. The location explained Wilde's zoning variance for light industry in a residential neighborhood. The small shop made a taxable entity out of an otherwise useless lot.

The office at the end of the building was pretty much filled by four desks occupied by young women; another, obviously Wilde's, was partitioned with floor to ceiling glass. To the right a wall did nothing to keep out a high level of buzz-

ing, humming, screeching, thudding, and general din guaranteed to leave the office staff twitching by the end of the day.

Wilde was Barney's height but a great deal heavier and with a lot less hair, his reduced to a black fringe. The left sleeve of his shirt was pinned up. Edna wouldn't have called him handsome. The forehead was too high, the nose too broad, the mouth a thin-lipped horizontal slash; still, the face had the power of a man accustomed to giving orders.

Barney had wondered idly about why Wilde walked around with that pinned-up sleeve when so many types of prostheses were available, but that was Wilde's business. No two men looked at the same problem the same way.

Wilde broke off talking to one of the young women long enough to say, "He's back there still scratching his head."

Corcoran led the way through the din of the machine shop to a double door and a passage. One side had men's and women's washrooms; the other several doors, one of which led outside. The passage opened up into a white cinder block cavern, bright with light from suspended industrial size fluorescents.

The waiting, wire-thin, bony figure appeared to be as charged with energy as one of the circuits he installed, and like them would probably continue until his heart blew from overload like a fuse.

Barney was treated to a fifteen minute lecture on the installation of electrical systems, complete with circuits, overloads, phases, wire sizes, safety practices, and circuit breakers, proving that nothing was closer to Dutch's heart than his work. None of which had any bearing on why he was here until he caught the statement that Hayden had been killed when connecting the second of two receptacles to be used for special bench mounted machinery.

"Hold it," he said. "That's the one I want to see."

Dutch led them to a metal box on the wall, a gleaming aluminum conduit rising from it to join others running across the wood rafters in the ceiling. Dangling from the end of the wires projecting from the box was a three-pronged receptacle.

"I asked Dutch to leave it the way he found it," said Corcoran.

Dutch tapped the receptacle with a forefinger. "You can see he was ready to push it into the box and attach the cover. One minute's work. He'd have done it like this—" He held the ears

of the receptacle between forefinger and thumb of each hand and worked it partially into the box, before placing thumb and forefinger of his left hand on the ears and pushing it all the way into place. "That's how he'd have done it, you see, but the burns on his hand say that he must have grabbed it like this—" his finger and thumb bridged the screw terminals, instinctively avoiding actually touching them.

"That could do it," said Barney.

"It sure could, but the first thing you learn is that since you can't see, hear, or smell electricity, you don't know it's there until it bites you, so you'd always better damned well work as though it is. Even though Hayden knew he'd turned off the circuit breaker, he'd have worked as though he hadn't—"

"Hold on. Why was the circuit connected at all? It seems to me that you'd introduce current only after all the boxes were installed."

Dutch nodded at him approvingly. "You're right, but we activated this line to give us power for our tools rather than string extension cords across the floor. We flagged the two we left open to show they were hot, but Hayden didn't need a flag to know that. He connected

one, then went to work on this one. The breaker was off because it was the first thing I checked, but even if it hadn't been, no way he'd have been zapped with 110 volts hard enough to kill him. Forget that he was a little damp from running out to the van. Wet or dry, he took no chances, made no mistakes."

"Wouldn't the breaker have snapped off when he shorted it?"

"Could've." Dutch placed a hand on Barney's shoulder. "Look. Let me see if I can make you understand because I sure as hell can't get through to Corcoran. Forget breakers on or off. Forget live circuits and dead circuits. Forget everything. What I'm trying to get across is that none of *that* makes a damned bit of difference. What it comes down to is I've been in the business for more than thirty years and I don't know how Jimmie Hayden died."

No mistaking the grimness in his voice. After considering all the factors and eliminating them one at a time, only one logical solution should remain. Dutch couldn't find it and wouldn't rest until he did.

Barney traced the gleaming conduit with his eyes, up the wall and across the rafters to disappear with the others into

a hole below the ceiling at the far end.

"Well, he had to touch something hot." Barney tapped the conduit. "What about this?"

Dutch snorted. "I already explained that to Corcoran. Conduits are attached to the circuit-breaker box, which is grounded. I'd have noticed anything wrong there. No, the only thing that would carry electricity would be the wires."

"Let's take a look anyway," said Barney.

Dutch led them to one of the doors in the passageway. Inside, the conduits that came through the hole at the ceiling fanned out and plunged into the top of a gray box.

"Which one carries the wire for—"

Dutch impatiently indicated the first one. The box was at eye level. Barney donned his half glasses and stood on tiptoe to examine the bright thin-wall tubing. The end of the conduit was scratched, a barely visible twin row of shallow pits crossing it diagonally. Barney peered at the others.

"Why is this one scratched and the others not?"

"Jeez," said Dutch disgustedly. "No one gives a damn if a conduit gets scratched."

"Not even by something that looks like an alligator clip?"

Dutch stared at him for a moment before leaning forward to look. He cursed under his breath, pulled a screwdriver from his pocket, gave four screws a half turn, and pulled off the entire box front, exposing an orderly mass of wires and connections. He focused a flashlight on the top row of screw terminals, peered closely, made a choking sound, and turned away, almost sagging. "My God. It looks like someone bypassed the breaker and fed 220 volts right into the damned conduit from the bus bar." His voice was soft with shock and disbelief.

It wasn't that he had no imagination, thought Barney. The bus bar was where the outside feed was attached, and where the internal circuits began. That someone would use it to kill a man was unthinkable.

"Not only the conduit but the receptacle box," said Barney. "Thinking it was safe, Hayden wouldn't have thought twice about grabbing it with one hand and using the other to force the receptacle into it. He was hit with 220 volts, not the 110 the circuit carried, which was why it seemed wrong to you. Good thing you insisted he was too careful to have an accident."

Corcoran shook his head. "You're a great help. You were

supposed to explain an accident, not find a murder."

"Well, you shouldn't have a problem. How many people would know what Hayden would be doing? And when?"

Barney drew it out on a pad as he explained it to Edna. The killer had loosened the screw set on the coupler attaching the conduit to the box, pushed it up slightly, and fastened a clip at the end of a jump wire. He'd then removed the front of the box and fastened the clip at the other end to what was called the main—the bus bar to which the wires bringing the electricity into the building were connected—allowing that higher, deadlier current to flow directly along the conduit to the receptacle box. Hayden would have no reason to think it was no longer safe, so when he grabbed it, that direct connection had given him a jolt that would drop the healthiest person, the burned hand making it appear he'd grasped a live receptacle. Which Dutch insisted could never happen.

The bypass couldn't have been there when Hayden turned off the breaker. He'd have noticed it. It had to have been installed after he'd finished the first receptacle and moved to the second—a space

of no more than five minutes. The killer removed the jump wire after Hayden died, reconnected everything properly and scrubbed off whatever scorch marks had been created. When Dutch had looked for the cause, everything was normal.

He grinned at her slight form. "You don't have to understand the details, any more than a juror would. All you have to accept is that someone deliberately placed 220 volts where Hayden would never expect it for the express purpose of killing him. Remember that washer of yours?"

Twenty years ago, she'd mentioned that the hair on her arms stood up when she touched her washer. Two minutes later, Barney knew why. The small mercury switch that turned it off when the lid was raised had shorted out, leaking current into the casing. If she'd rested one wet hand on the case and plunged the other into the water to arrange her wash, he might have become an instant widower.

"If I'd bugged up that switch deliberately, it would be similar to this. No one would have suspected me, but you'd be dead. An accident. Of course I'd have become wealthy after suing the manufacturer."

"I'd have seen to it you'd never have enjoyed the money—"

Barney chuckled. "No doubt in my mind."

"But who would do such a terrible thing?"

"Corcoran has three candidates. Dutch—"

"But he was the one who insisted—"

"Could be a way to divert suspicion. The apprentice, who could have come back through the door in the passageway, and Wilde, who was the only one there."

"I'm sure Corcoran appreciated your efforts," said Edna, "but since he returned you undamaged for a change, you have no excuse to avoid mowing the lawn."

He sighed. "Come on, John Henry. We're dealing with a hard woman here."

John Henry reluctantly heaved himself to his feet. As a pup, he'd had a grand time barking at the roaring mower. That was now kid stuff, but might as well humor the old man. Give him a bark or two and then settle in the shade of the elm. If that damned white cat showed up, he'd have some real fun.

Two days later, Corcoran loomed in the doorway of Barney's garage workshop, dusted off a stool, and waited silently until he finished cutting a tenon on

the end of a small piece of walnut.

"Where's my dog?"

"My dog is walking with my wife. Make an arrest?"

"No. There's a little thing called proof. I ain't got none. For nobody. Dutch and the apprentice—"

"What's his name, anyway?"

"Les Morovich. Big guy with a beard and hair in a pigtail. Called Moose. What else? They obviously had the smarts. So did Wilde. Electricity is no mystery to him. None has an alibi. Dutch was on his way to estimate another job, but he can't prove it. Moose was on his way home, but he can't prove that either. Wilde was there, but he doesn't have to prove he didn't leave the office. We have to prove he did. I also ain't got no motive for anybody. Dutch? Hayden was his best man. Had an occasional argument, but nothing serious. Hayden raked Moose up and down when he did something dumb, but that's normal. If you got the big guy mad enough, he might clout you, but he's not the type to plan something like that. Wilde? As far as we know, he met Hayden for the first time when he showed up to wire the place and never talked to him much while he was there. And naturally we checked Hayden's wife. With two kids already

and six months pregnant, she had no reason to want the family provider and father of her children knocked off. Furthermore, Hayden never mentioned being worried that someone was out to get him or anything like that."

Barney fitted the tenon into the mortise. Perfect.

Corcoran cleared his throat. "Hey, Barney—"

"No." Barney pointed at the door. "Out."

"C'mon. I need a suggestion here. We've done all the usual things and got nowhere."

"Take the suspects into a room and whack them with a rubber hose."

"Get serious, will you?"

"I am. I made a commitment on this clock, and I'm running out of time."

Corcoran slid off the stool. "Okay, but give it a little thought, all right? And my best to Edna and John Henry."

"Not a chance. She'll throw something at me, and John Henry will sulk because he missed you."

Incorporating a few of his own touches, the developing Vienna regulator was shaping up nicely, Barney thought.

Corcoran had told him to get serious. Good comment. He did have a tendency to be flip about something important to others. Like Edna's tulips. Lack of sen-

sitivity, they called it these days.

But aside from that, he was in the middle of another of his principle versus common sense mental go-rounds. While principle said he had an obligation to help find the killer, common sense was telling him he was really running out of time to finish the clock properly, and he'd damned well better make a decision fast.

Oh, hell. He set his tools aside. Over the last two days, he'd been trying to push the image of Hayden's pregnant wife and the fatherless children from his thoughts, mind drifting from what he was doing—which, as Corcoran pointed out, was a sure way to lose a finger when running sharp power tools.

First things first. He could always lock the door against Edna and work through the night.

He blew the dust off the workshop phone and dialed Corcoran, thinking that the murder had to be an opportunity seen and taken by someone who had marked Hayden for death, either for a reason Hayden knew nothing about or one he'd forgotten, since he hadn't been suspicious at all.

When they patched him through, he asked, "How far

back did you go when you checked out the three of them?"

"Recent history. Why?"

"Take them back to the day they were born."

"You think—"

"Corcoran, all I know is that a piece of wood can have a beautiful grain on one side but a defect on the other, so you put the defect inside where it can't be seen unless someone looks for it. You searched for a jumper wire?"

"In the creek and the woods on the other side. Logical places to get rid of it."

"Kids play there and might find it. Root through the dumpsters behind the stores in the shopping center. Better move fast. Once it's on the way to a landfill, it's gone forever."

"Dumpsters? Echhh!" said Corcoran.

Corcoran appeared the next afternoon and fussed over John Henry, who looked like a moth-eaten Dalmatian because he always napped in the sawdust below the bench saw, before handing Barney a sheet of paper.

Barney adjusted his glasses and read, a sinking feeling in his stomach as the words rolled by.

"We also found this." Corcoran held up a clear plastic bag holding a short, thick length of

insulated wire with heavy duty clips on each end, one showing traces of scorching.

"Behind the video rental shop. No prints. Not a standard item available at your friendly local electrical supply house, although the wire and clips are. This was put together for the job. So, while we know, we still have no proof."

"Maybe you don't need any. Push the so-called murder weapon and motive under his nose and try for a confession."

"Like one of those socko TV mystery endings Edna likes?" asked Corcoran dryly. "They can fit a confession in before the final commercial, but real life doesn't work that way."

"Might, this time," said Barney thoughtfully. "With a motive like this, I'm not sure that killing Hayden is enough. I have the feeling that he'll want everyone to know he did it and why. All it would take would be a little encouragement. You're an actor. Put on a little skit with you as the star and the other two as supporting cast and fake him out."

Corcoran smiled. "Barney, I'm an actor, not a playwright. Since it's your idea, *you* come up with a script and I'll give it a try. Just be sure to write yourself into it."

"Listen, you wanted a suggestion. I gave you one. Now go

do your job. I don't have the time—"

Corcoran folded his arms. "Okay. Just remember that if I try it and it doesn't work, you're going to blame yourself. I know you. You'll tell yourself you had a responsibility no matter what it cost—"

Principle before common sense again.

If he'd ever wondered why Corcoran, at his age, was wearing sergeant's stripes instead of handing out parking tickets, he now knew.

They gathered in Wilde's office after hours, the silence after the din produced during the day somehow oppressive.

Corcoran cleared his throat. "I need a little help from you fellas. We found this—" He held up the bag with the wire. "We think it might have something to do with Hayden, but we can't figure out how it was used."

"That's a jump wire," said Dutch.

"Where did you find it?" asked Wilde.

Corcoran ignored the question. "We thought that's what it was, but for what? Too short to jumpstart a car and too heavy for anything else."

Dutch leaned forward to peer at the bag. "That clip shows it

carried a lot of current, like maybe at least 220—"

"Well, we got plenty of that around here," said Moose. "Maybe it *did* have something to do with Hayden."

"No," said Dutch. "The circuit he was working on was 110."

"So it wasn't used to bypass the breaker on that circuit?" asked Barney.

Dutch shook his head. "Simpler to flip the switch on, and even then, as I told you more than once, you're talking 110 volts. And as I also told you more than once, Hayden was so careful he could've installed that receptacle even if the wires were hot."

"What are you people talking about?" asked Wilde. "It could have been used by anyone for anything."

"Let's do this one at a time." Barney turned to Moose. "You first. Any ideas?"

"I dunno. Maybe as you said. Bridge the dead circuit to a live terminal somehow—"

"How many times do I have to say there was no point to that?" snapped Dutch.

Moose hesitated. "Well then, it might have been used to make the conduit and receptacle box hot. Not even Hayden would expect that."

Dutch snorted. "They're always grounded."

Moose stiffened. "Not if—" "Not if what?" prompted Barney.

"Well . . . if you disconnect the conduit to break the ground, then used that jump wire to bridge it to a live 220 terminal, that way the conduit carries 220—"

Moose folded his arms, his voice defiant. "Right?"

Wilde rose slowly, wagging a forefinger in his general direction as though pumping the words out.

"Do you realize what he said?"

Barney raised his hands. "I'm not sure—"

"What more do you need? Dammit, I'm no electrician, but I know if you connect an ungrounded conduit to a bus bar, anyone who touches it is in trouble!"

"He didn't say bus bar," said Barney slowly. "He said live terminal—"

"Don't play word games. What difference does it make?"

"Ordinarily, none. But we already know, Mr. Wilde, that the teeth on those clips match scratches on the bus bar. Only the man who used it—"

Wilde's lips tightened. "Watch what you say. You're implying that I killed the man. I didn't even know him." He lifted the arm in the pinned up sleeve. "Furthermore—"

"It would be difficult to make and use that jump wire with only one hand, but not impossible."

Wilde snorted. "I have no motive."

"The hell you didn't," snapped Dutch. "Me and Hayden never realized who you were because the names were different. To us, he was the Stowe boy."

Wilde's face grayed. He stared at Dutch for a moment before waving an arm in dismissal. "So if you wondered why I shed no tears when he died, now you know."

"I know you killed him, you scumball!"

Moose launched himself across the desk and wrapped both hands around Wilde's throat. The three of them dived after him. Barney saw a big arm and grabbed it. A fist came out of the melee and caught him in the left eye, treating him to a visual explosion more colorful than a supernova.

Corcoran finally locked one of Moose's arms behind his back and threatened him with a night in jail.

"But he killed him," roared Moose. *"Left his pregnant wife with two kids!"*

Bent double, cupping his throbbing eye and stifling a huge desire to moan, Barney hated to admit Edna was right.

Every time he became involved with Corcoran, he suffered bodily damage.

Massaging his throat, Wilde croaked. "Get out. All of you. I'm calling the chief, Corcoran—"

"Mr. Wilde," said Corcoran softly, "you can't kill a man and expect to continue life as usual. It may not be certain that you'll be brought to trial, but it really doesn't matter whether you end up in court or not—"

Damned good ad libbing, thought Barney.

"It was a mistake to kill Hayden before the job was finished. Moose might calm down enough not to bounce you around, but you'll never get a licensed electrician to finish the wiring. If you do it yourself, or use someone unlicensed, I'll make sure the township withholds approval. You're out of business. You borrowed two hundred thousand for the expansion, but without the additional production, you'll never meet the loan payments. The bank will take over your collateral, which is everything you own."

"We'll see. You can't threaten—"

Barney cut him off. "Stop the nonsense, Mr. Wilde. You felt that the justice system failed, so you took your own revenge. I'm surprised you don't stand

up and admit it, because surely you want everyone to know what a hero you are. The sergeant is pointing out that vengeance works both ways. If you don't stand trial, he'll avenge Jimmy Hayden by ruining you. You've lost, Mr. Wilde. Your choice is between trying to drum up a little sympathy or experiencing quiet disaster."

They left the office, Corcoran dragging Moose. Halfway to the door, they spun as a shouting Wilde charged after them. "*Hero? You bet I'm a hero! Let's see what your damned justice system does for me!*"

As Corcoran drove Wilde away, Dutch muttered, "The guy is ninety-eight cents short of a dollar."

"More like twenty-five, but that's not our call." Barney fingered his throbbing eye. "I suppose we all deserve an Emmy. Except you, Moose. Worst damned piece of overacting in history."

"Who was acting?" growled Moose.

An iron-lipped, hands-on-hips Edna examined the puffy iridescence surrounding his eye while wishing her Emperors could achieve that marvelous depth of purple.

"Why?" she asked.

Barney gingerly applied the icepack as John Henry, chin on

his thigh and soft, sympathetic eyes rolled upward, drooled on his chinos.

"Ten years ago, his wife divorced him, was awarded custody of their son and married a man named Stowe, and her new husband adopted the boy. Not too long afterward the boy ran into the street in front of Hayden's van. He was killed. Not Hayden's fault. Completely unavoidable, according to a half dozen witnesses, so he was never charged. Wilde was away at the time. When he learned about it, he tried to ease the pain by finishing off a bottle. Then he climbed into his car with the intention of finishing off Hayden—"

Edna pressed fingertips to her lips and shook her head. A universal feminine gesture that could indicate everything from disbelief and disapproval to pity and sympathy, thought Barney.

"The poor man," she said. "I suppose any parent would know how he felt."

"But only a few would act on it. Not being able to drive more than fifty feet in a straight line, he smashed into a tree. Very ironic if he'd run down an innocent bystander, but I'm sure he never considered that. When he woke up in the hospital minus an arm, he had two things to blame Hayden for. He carried

that hate with him all those years. Did without an artificial arm so he'd never forget."

"Couldn't anyone tell? Didn't anyone know?"

"Someone who feels like that doesn't discuss it, you know. Wilde knew Hayden worked for Dutch, so he gave Dutch the contract. All he needed now was the well-known means and opportunity. As Dutch said, neither he nor Hayden had any idea Wilde was the father of the boy because the names were different. If they had, Hayden wouldn't have gone near the place. I'm not sure that would have changed anything, though. Hayden and Wilde were an explosive mixture. Like certain chemicals, some people can't be brought together without creating a disaster."

"Ha," she said smugly. "Like you and Corcoran, Cyclops."

The reminder that he now had to finish the clock using only one eye gave him a headache to go with his throbbing socket.

Two icebags and six aspirins later, the phone rang.

Edna answered and handed it to Barney. "Sergeant Nitro for you, Mr. Glycerin."

"How's the eye?" asked Corcoran.

"I'm hoping I can see out of it by morning. Chief congratulate you?"

"None was in order. Wilde changed his mind. He phoned his lawyer. What he said wasn't really a confession, and the D.A. agreed we didn't have enough evidence to hold him."

"So our little skit was a flop."

"Not really. Wilde changed the ending, Barney. His lawyer offered to drive him home. On the way, they ran head-on into a semi. We had to pry them out. The airbag and seatbelt saved the attorney. Wilde . . . no chance. The attorney said he

forced the smashup by grabbing the wheel."

Explosive mixtures, thought Barney.

Didn't have to be people. Could be all of the negative, soul-eating human emotions: grief, guilt, shame, despair, remorse, regret—mixed, swirled, whipped into a solid block like plastic explosive, but equally inert until triggered by a shock—

For Wilde, you could say it had taken 220 volts.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

AND BEAUTY THE PRIZE



by Henry Slesar

The hours were the clue. Twelve, but not one. Ten, but not nine. And the days: Monday, but not Tuesday. Friday, but not Saturday. Elliot West, after three months of regimented days and hours, began to see a pattern in Enid's appointments, a pattern that couldn't be explained by her modeling chores. He was an art buyer for an advertising agency, and he knew something about a model's life, and while he wanted nothing more than to *believe* the soft voice and magenta eyes of Enid Patterson, the facts were too insistent. Where did she go? What did she do? The mystery was a delicious torture.

When he picked her up at her apartment for their Friday night, ten o'clock, date, he stood rooted in the center of the living room carpet with his overcoat on his arm and his face brooding. Enid was flying about the room as usual, snapping off lights, and rushing him out the door as if haste was vital. "For heaven's sake, are we going or aren't we?" she said, tossing the thick auburn hair that plunged steeply towards her shoulders. "I'm sick of this place, Elliot."

"I'm not sick of it," he muttered. "You're always hustling me out of here, Enid. Why so anxious?"

"Anxious?" She stood in front of him, a small girl, too full-fashioned to be called petite. "What do you mean?"

"Every night I come up here it's rush, rush, rush. What the heck's *wrong* with this place, Enid?"

"There's nothing wrong," she said quietly. "I spend a lot of time here, and I like to get away from the apartment when I can. Nothing wrong about that, is there?" Elliot looked contrite and found her hand. She turned towards him, her eyes reflecting something not in the room. "Please let's go," she whispered.

"Not before we talk about it. Look, I'm not stupid. There's a *thing* about this place. I can feel it. These cockeyed hours of yours, that rule book. Why Friday, and not Saturday? What kind of modeling do you do on Saturday?"

She sat down, her wrap still around her shoulders. "I thought maybe you'd never ask me," she said flatly. "That was dumb of me, wasn't it?"

"What is it, Enid? What's it all about?"

She told him. He listened, making her repeat the important passages, trying to grasp the significance of every word and intonation. His face remained blank, even when he asked her questions.

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"You make what?" he said numbly. "A hundred, hundred and fifty a week? It wasn't the money that made you do it?"

She shook her head, tight-lipped.

"Did he help you any, this guy? Was that his pitch? Modeling jobs, your name in lights, Broadway? What the hell was it, Enid? I'm interested, academically."

"Elliot!"

He was breathing normally now, hard but normally, his voice distorted by the scrambled emotions of rage and jealousy. "What was it then? Diamonds, furs?"

"Stop it!" she cried. "Hear the rest, for God's sake!"

"What else is there? Okay, so you found yourself a Big Daddy. So congratulations and best of luck!" He stood up, but he didn't move away. "So let's hear the rest!"

After a moment, she said:

"He loves me. That's the truth, Elliot. His name is Cyril Hardeen, and he's fifty-five years old. He's kind to me, kind and gentle. He's such a gentle man, Elliot, you've no idea."

"Sounds great." The sneer was blatant. "Sounds ideal. I'm glad you're so happy, Enid."

"I'm not, I'm not!" she sobbed.

"So why tell me? Why not tell Big Daddy? Maybe another mink coat will dry those tears—"

"You're not even *trying* to understand. When I met Cy, I was twenty-one. It's been three years, Elliot. I could have left him any time; I was established, I was getting work. It wasn't the money that held me, it was—something else."

"You mean you love him?"

"Not the way you mean, I couldn't explain it to you in a million years. You see everything in black and white, Elliot, clean and dirty. If you knew Cy, knew how he treated me . . ." She looked up, yearning yet defiant. "He's the kindest man I've ever known. I could never hurt him. He's like a knight out of a storybook, a Don Quixote . . ."

"And now what?" he said harshly. "Does the clock strike twelve?" She studied him for a moment.

"It doesn't have to, Elliot. Not if you say it."

"If I say what?"

"The magic words. Don't you know what they are?"

"Look, Enid—"

"Say them, Elliot."

"All right! I love you! Is that the formula?"

She smiled wanly. "The words are right. The tone's not so hot."

"I love you," Elliot repeated slowly. "I want you to move out of this place. I want you to throw Don Quixote in the junkpile."

"Don't say it because of *him*, Elliot. Say it for me."

"I love you," Elliot said.

A white-whiskered knight clanked through his dreams until Monday morning. He woke up early, and lay in bed muttering occasional words of self-advice. It was a habit. He wondered what Enid would think of it when they were married.

When he reached his office, there was a yellow slip on his desk blotter. Time: 9:30. Caller: Mr. Cyril Hardeen. Message: Wants you to call back. The telephone number was written below. Cyril Hardeen. Calling *him*.

He didn't obey the instruction, not right away. He called Enid first.

"Listen, doll," he said, "unless this is a crazy coincidence, Mr. Hardeen *knows* me."

"I told him, Elliot. I couldn't stop myself. He didn't make a scene or anything. He was terribly kind. He said he understood, and just hoped you were—well, you know."

"Worthy of you?"

"Something like that."

"But what's he calling *me* for? What does he want?"

"Just to talk. And please, Elliot—be gentle with him. For my sake."

"All right," he growled. "For your sake."

A moment later, Cyril Hardeen was on the wire.

"Mr. West? Thank you for calling back." Hardeen's voice came through thin and piercingly, but failed to create any mental image of the man. "Enid's told me about you . . ."

Elliot swallowed, and suddenly he felt tongue-tied. "Look, Mr. Hardeen—"

"What I was wondering," the voice said, unruffled, "is there a possibility of our getting together? I'd very much like to make it this noon, only I have a lunch date I can't break."

"Any time you say, Mr. Hardeen."

"Well, what I was wondering, since you're a bachelor and all, if you wouldn't care to visit me at my home this evening. I live right here in the city. We could have a drink, find out something about

each other. How does that sound?"

Elliot grimaced. "Fine. About what time?"

"Let's say seven. Is that agreeable?"

"Seven o'clock is fine."

Hardeen gave him the address, and Elliot jotted it down on a yellow pad. The conversation had been as genteel and civilized as he could have wanted, and he felt better about the promise he had made Enid. He wasn't quite so self-assured when the big clock in the office hallway said six twenty; even if the old gaffer was going to be a real Noel Coward about everything. He preferred never to see Cyril Hardeen, never to have the opportunity to picture him in amorous collaboration with Enid Patterson. He felt a little better when he went to the office washroom to freshen up; he looked at his young face, the smooth line of his chin, and knew that whatever Enid felt for Hardeen, he had *this*, the clean, unsullied look and strength of youth. What chance did white hairs and time-eroded flesh have against it?

Cyril Hardeen's address turned out to be a renovated brownstone on a quiet East Side street. Elliot rang the doorbell, and was answered promptly by a husky man in a white shirt and black bow tie, who was just slipping on a gray jacket that didn't match his dark trousers. The man, with his flattened nose and scarred face, didn't look much like a butler, but that seemed to be his function. "Mr. West?" he said in a soft voice. "Mr. Hardeen's expecting you."

Elliot stepped into the hallway and allowed the man to take his overcoat, scarf, and gloves. The hall was narrow, but the papered walls had been scooped out where shadow boxes held cool white busts of heroic figures.

"Right in here," the butler said, and Elliot followed him. It was quite a room, decorated the way an English lord might have liked his diggings in the nineteenth century. The furniture was staunch and lion-footed, upholstered in rich, royal velvet. There was a fireplace big enough for ox-roasting, and in front of it an elaborate table with an inlaid chessboard, the pieces six inches high and prepared for battle. All except the white queen. That was in Cyril Hardeen's hand when he stood up to say hello, and the way his thumb was stroking the smooth surface of the queen's torso made Elliot's stomach tighten.

"Right on time," Hardeen said cheerfully. "Thanks for coming, Mr. West; I'm really glad to see you."

Shake hands? Elliot wasn't sure. He didn't. Hardeen waved him to a chair, and then fooled him by not sitting down himself, giving him the advantage of height. Point one for your side, Elliot thought.

"How about a drink? I make my drinking decisions by the weather myself. Very cold, brandy. Mild, scotch. Warm, gin." Hardeen laughed pleasantly.

"Gin," Elliot said. It was cold outside. Point one for him. He studied the old man as he made the drink. Don Quixote wasn't a bad analogy: Hardeen was thin and gaunt but not very tall. His hair was plentiful and waxy-gray; there was an almost invisible mustache dividing his fine nose and narrow lips. His hands were his most impressive physical attribute; they were sculptured, sensitive, ageless.

"Look," Elliot said, "why don't we get right down to it, Mr. Hardeen? I'm sure I don't have to tell you how Enid feels about all this. She's not—unappreciative of what you've done for her, and she doesn't want anything unpleasant to happen. She thinks a lot of you, you know."

Hardeen inclined his head, in a slight, sardonic bow.

"I don't mean to sound patronizing," Elliot said, "but you must have expected that something like this would happen, sooner or later. You couldn't expect her to—" He stopped.

"Love an older man?"

"I didn't mention love." Politeness was getting to be a bore. "Why should I kid you? Enid's *twenty-four*, for God's sake! What the hell kind of future could *you* give her? Look, you knew it would happen one day, so why fight it?"

Hardeen smiled feebly. "Youth is a powerful opponent."

There was a moment's silence between them.

"May I tell you something about myself, Mr. West?"

"If you want to."

"I'm fifty-nine years old," Hardeen said. "Even older than Enid thinks I am. But what's worse, Mr. West, is that I am a throwback, an anachronism. I'm that most hopeless of creatures—a romantic, born into an age of dirty streets and cheap music. If I'd been lucky I would have been born in medieval days, when honor was honor, and beauty the prize . . ."

Elliot shifted restlessly in his chair.

"Wait just one moment, Mr. West. I know I'm boring you with my talk, but give me just a few more minutes. You owe me that, at least."

"I'm listening, Mr. Hardeen."

"No, you don't understand. I don't want you to listen here. I want you to come with me, downstairs."

"Downstairs?"

"Yes, there's a basement, downstairs, all 'finished' if that's the expression. And I'd like, if you don't mind, to conclude our conversation there. I've a reason for it, believe me. Will you come?"

"Sure, I guess so," Elliot said.

"It's that way," Cyril Hardeen said. Elliot trailed after him, through a dining room with a baronial table, through a kitchen that was incongruously modern except for huge black-iron hinges on the cupboards, and then down a steep flight of stairs that led into the nether regions of the brownstone. When Hardeen found the light switch, hidden fluorescents pinged and blinked as if roused from a long sleep, and shed cold hard light over cork-lined walls, a linoleum floor, and a soundproofed ceiling.

"I'm not much for playrooms," Hardeen said ironically. "It was the former owner who had visions of shuffleboard games and cosy hours before a television set. I rarely use the place now, but I have a good use for it tonight."

Elliot turned to look at him. The older man was unbuttoning his well-tailored jacket and walking slowly towards the sofa. He removed it, folded it carefully, and placed it over the sofa arm. In his shirtsleeves, he looked even smaller and more pathetically fragile than he had upstairs.

"Well, Mr. West?" he said. "Do you understand now?"

"Understand what?"

"What I expect from you. What a man—a man like myself, at any rate—expects from someone who comes between him and his woman. It's an ancient custom, Mr. West, ancient and honorable." He folded his hands and took a step forward.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Hardeen's jaw went up.

"I'm speaking of combat," he said.

"Of *what*?"

"Combat. Physical combat. What could be plainer? Men have been settling disputes like this for centuries. I'm suggesting we settle this one the same way."

Elliot laughed brokenly. "Now wait just a second. You don't think I'm going to *fight* you, do you?"

"Why not? You don't think Enid's worth it?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. A punch in the jaw isn't going to change anything, Mr. Hardeen, you ought to know that."

"Perhaps it won't," Hardeen snapped. "But whether it changes anything or not doesn't matter. I want proof of your feeling for Enid, Mr. West; I'm willing to offer my own. Now will you fight?"

He stepped closer, truculently, and Elliot made a hasty comparison. The man was a good six inches shorter than Elliot, and probably ninety pounds lighter. At close range, the small, neat face clearly showed the traces of the man's fifty-nine years.

"This is the nuttiest thing I ever heard of," he said, trying to keep the grin on his face. "I won't fight you, Mr. Hardeen; I wouldn't think of it. Even if it could settle anything, I wouldn't do it. I'm almost thirty years younger than you, Mr. Hardeen—"

"You needn't remind me, Mr. West. Just answer the question. Will you fight?"

"Look, if you've got some crazy idea about a duel or anything like that—"

"I'm not talking about killing each other, Mr. West. I'm speaking of unarmed combat, the old fashioned, primitive sort. And if you're worried about the inequality of our years and strength—" Hardeen smiled. "I've thought of that, too. There's an old custom in affairs of this sort, and I think it applies here."

"What custom?"

"Under Louis Quatorze, many of the French nobility found personal combat offensive to them, and employed substitutes to carry out their affairs of honor. Even Napoleon himself, when challenged, offered to send a fencing master as his plenipotentiary." Hardeen's still posture relaxed. "In this case, a substitute seems even more justified, don't you think? Someone closer to your own age and prowess? Excuse me."

Hardeen moved past him and went to the stairwell. With his hand on the railing, he called out.

"Joseph! You up there, Joseph?"

The door above them opened, and Elliot heard the heavy clump of the butler's footsteps on the stairs. He came into view with his scarred face expressionless. Hardeen put his hand on the sleeve of the man's gray jacket and brought him forward as if to introduce a dear friend.

"This is Joseph, Mr. West—you met him upstairs. Joseph has been a good friend of mine since his retirement."

Elliot looked at the battered head and guessed what Joseph had retired from. Then he swallowed and said, "If you think you're going to egg me into a fight, Mr. Hardeen, you made a wrong guess. I'm not fighting you or Joseph or anybody. Now if you don't mind—" He took a step towards the exit but realized that Joseph's large body wasn't stationed there by accident. "Excuse me," he said.

Joseph grunted, put his hand flat on Elliot's chest, and shoved lightly. Beside him, Hardeen smiled and moved off noiselessly towards the sofa. The butler stripped off his jacket and dropped it on the bottom stair. "Come on," he said softly. "Come on, Mr. West."

"You keep your hands off me," Elliot said, trying to be calm. "You touch me and I'll call the cops."

Joseph shrugged, lifted his meaty left hand and stared at it curiously. Then, lightly, experimentally, he balled it into a fist and jabbed it into Elliot's face. Startled by the physical impact, Elliot's eyes widened; he put his hand to his cheek and rubbed where it hurt. "Come on. Please," Joseph said, his voice pained.

Elliot made a rush for the stairs and met the fleshy bulwark of the butler's chest. He found himself thrust back, and Joseph's right fist whipped out, still restrained, and struck him above the heart. He expelled air, but kept his hands at his sides. Joseph, shaking his head, moved in again with his left, and this time the jab hurt enough to make Elliot angry and reckless. He lifted his arms defensively, and the pose made Joseph sigh with gratification; he sneaked a right to his mid-section and followed with a left cross that staggered Elliot against the wall. Elliot came back with a wildly swinging right that Joseph flicked off indifferently; then the butler drove an uppercut to the chin that made the lights in the basement go out and the linoleum floor rise up to meet him. He didn't want to get up, but he did; Joseph pounded his face with two lefts, took an ineffectual blow on the shoulder, and then swung a right that exploded on Elliot's cheek and sent him spinning towards the wall. He hit the cork, bounced, and slid to the floor. This time he didn't try to rise. He looked up at Joseph, rubbed his face, and felt the sticky blood.

"All right," a distant voice said. It was Hardeen's. "All right, Joseph, I think that's enough."

The butler nodded, walked idly back to the stairs, and picked up his coat. He put it on carefully, took a small black comb from the inside pocket, and ran it through his straight black hair.

Hardeen helped Elliot to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said graciously. "I thought you might try and put up more of a fight. But I'm satisfied, at any rate."

"You're crazy," Elliot said breathing hard. "That's what's wrong with you. You're absolutely out of your mind."

"You can leave now, if you like. But I wouldn't advise you to tell Enid about this, Mr. Elliot—I have a strong doubt that she'll believe you. I've known her a great deal longer than you, of course."

"Don't worry about that. I'm moving Enid out of that place tonight. I won't let her stay with you another day—"

Hardeen shrugged. "So perhaps you win after all, Mr. West. No hard feelings?"

Elliot looked at him, searching for signs of the madness that must be lurking in the eyes of the older man, but found nothing but whimsy and ironic humor. Then he turned towards the stairway.

"I hope you don't mind if Joseph doesn't show you out, Mr. West," Hardeen said. "We still have some things to discuss, Joseph and I."

Elliot glowered at them both and went up the stairs. When he reached the street, the cold air bit his raw cheek and made him wince with pain. Then he flagged a taxi and gave the address of his downtown apartment.

In the bathroom mirror, he studied the lavender welt under his right eye and gently touched the bloodied lip that was already ballooning. It was his first fist fight since childhood, but even those youthful scraps had made more sense than this one. Could he tell Enid about it? Would she ever believe that her gentle knight was capable of producing what he saw in his mirror? He shook his head, knowing that he'd need a better explanation than the truth.

He washed his face with cold water and dried it gingerly. Then he went to the living room and telephoned Enid. She wasn't home. He called an hour later, and when there was still no answer, he went to bed.

He was just falling gratefully into sleep when he heard the pounding on his door. He cursed and grumbled, even when he saw the gray, unfriendly faces of the two men standing in the hallway. When they said they were police officers, he blinked at the identification in their wallets and let them come in. The larger of the pair was named Marsh, and he was no time-waster.

"You'll have to come with us, Mr. West," he said bluntly. "You're charged with assault and battery. You'll have to come down to

headquarters and answer some questions."

"What's that, what? Assault and battery? What the hell are you talking about?"

The second man grunted. "Looks like you didn't do so well yourself. Maybe you ought to prefer your own charges, Mr. West." He smiled, without amiability.

"Look, I don't know what this is all about—"

Marsh was looking at a notebook. "Mr. Cyril Hardeen, 118 East 81st. You know him, right?"

"Yes, I know him."

He flipped the book closed. "I got a look at him before they carted him off to the hospital. Little guy. No chicken, either. You sure don't pick 'em your size, do you, buster?"

"But you're wrong! I never laid a finger on him—"

"Save it," Marsh said brusquely. "You can tell 'em the story downtown."

He told the story downtown, to every official ear that would listen, and saw cynical doubt in every official eye. He begged to see Enid, but Enid was at the hospital, ministering to her fallen knight. When she finally showed up, he flung himself towards her.

"Enid! Make them understand! I didn't touch the old guy, you know that—"

She shook her head, the anger on her face mixed with contempt. "How can you deny it, Elliot? The evidence is written all over you—"

"But it wasn't me! It must have been that butler of his!"

"Butler? What butler? Cy never had a butler in his life."

"But he *did* have one. A big, ugly guy. He knocked me around, and then Hardeen must have paid him to beat him up, too. Deliberately, for God's sake! Don't you see his plan? He *wanted* you to think this—"

Enid closed her eyes. "Please, Elliot. Don't make it worse. You proved your point. You're bigger and stronger than he is, I know that. But I don't want to hear about it, not any more. Leave us alone, Elliot."

She turned and walked out of the room. Elliot lifted his arms in a gesture of helpless despair, and then let them fall to his side like the arms of a windmill suddenly out of wind.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Joan Hess's ninth Claire Malloy mystery will leave her readers **Tickled to Death** (Dutton, \$18.95). Business at the Book Depot may be slow, but Claire resists the idea of a weekend at a luxurious lakeside home. Why? Because it's the house of Dick Cissel, and her best friend Luanne has just become engaged to Dick Cissel. A nice-looking man and a great dentist, perhaps; but hey, the guy has lost two healthy wives in almost as many years. If Luanne wants to get engaged to Bluebeard, at least Claire doesn't have to watch. Still, when the sheriff arrests Cissel, Claire can't refuse to help. Anyway, Caron, Claire's teenage daughter, actually has a job working at a nearby wildlife sanctuary. I won't give away anything more other than to state that Joan Hess has no peer in the category of Snappy One-Liner, and she's darn good with the longer bits of dialogue, too.

Act of God (Pocket, \$20) is Jeremiah Healy's ninth novel featuring Boston P.I. John Francis Cuddy. It's a strong tale of passion and greed with a couple of neat twists. Two clients walk into Cuddy's office with an offer to share his expenses. Pearl Rivkind is in mourning: an unknown assailant entered the upstairs offices of her late husband's furniture store and murdered Abe with his own fireplace poker. William Proft wasn't close to his sister, a secretary at Abe's store; but the coincidence of Debra's disappearance on the day of the murder seems suspicious to him. In private, Pearl admits that she now suspects her husband of having conducted an affair. She wants Cuddy to confirm or deny her suspicions so she can get on with her grieving. As for William, if his

sister has met with foul play, he stands to inherit a large sum of life insurance. It's an unusual beginning for a case, and it initially sends Cuddy off in two apparently separate directions. Before it's over, he has unearthed some secrets, another deadly act of greed, a devilishly complicated plot to get someone else's money, and more than one killer. Healy kept me guessing up to the final pages.

Sue Grafton continues the alphabet with "**K**" **Is for Killer** (Henry Holt, \$22.95), a darker and more compelling tale than many of Kinsey's cases. Beautiful Lorna Kepler died alone in her isolated rented cabin, and her body lay undiscovered long enough to make the forensics experts shrug their shoulders. Who could say how Lorna had actually died? She had been asthmatic; she might have had a severe attack that disabled, then killed, her. Ten months later, Lorna's mother Janice is still attending a support group to handle her grief. More than the name of a killer, Janice needs to know who her favorite, loner daughter really was. Lorna had had only a part-time job and lived very frugally, so her parents were shocked to learn the value of their daughter's estate. Janice decides to hire a private investigator to determine whether anything new can be learned. Grafton has created a fascinatingly seductive character in Lorna, whose presence is felt throughout the book. Though it seems that everyone connected to Lorna had secrets, none kept them better than the victim herself.

If a solid courtroom drama appeals, pick up a copy of Kate Wilhelm's **The Best Defense** (St. Martin's, \$21.95). Not only is attorney Barbara Holloway fun to watch in action, but the plot here has a classic whodunit angle. When Paula Kemmerman's husband got tired of hitting her, he threatened to harm their baby girl. That's when the normally passive Paula packed up her child and fled to a rural woman's shelter. Tragedy strikes, and Paula's child is killed in a fire that's obviously arson. Stunned into silence, Paula seems unwilling and unable to counter the state's accusation that she committed the crime. Paula's sister, however, doesn't believe she deserves the media's nickname of "Baby Killer" Kemmerman, and she persuades Barbara to take up her sister's defense. The action here is not confined to the courtroom, although the trial scenes sizzle, too. This is solid entertainment for those who like good characters, a clever plot, and strong suspense.

Atlanta reporter Kate Mulcay returns for her third foray into amateur sleuthing in Celestine Sibley's **Dire Happenings at Scratch Ankle** (HarperCollins, \$19). While covering a session of the State House of Representatives, Kate is impressed by a young

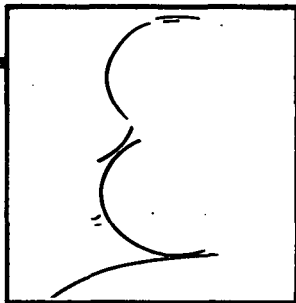
representative named Return Pickett, a Native American pleading to reopen a jurisdictional case of Cherokees in Georgia versus Tennessee. Kate considers the issue a dead horse, but Pickett talks her into coming up to his small town to tour the disputed lands. When the appointed Saturday arrives, Kate finds herself saddled with two neighbor girls, the irrepressible Candy sisters, but that's only the first intimation that the trip may not go well. Pickett's failure to keep his appointment quickly reveals his disappearance, and experienced rock climbers and cavers join the search parties. Look to Sibley for the pleasures of a sharp, sympathetic, but unsentimental protagonist, a bevy of quirky characters, and a rural Southern setting that's so foreign to most of us.

Publishers must still believe that the designation of "romantic suspense" is a sure way to kill sales. I guess they figure that readers have outgrown the gothic traditions of Victoria Holt and Phyllis Whitney. But don't be fooled. They're still publishing them; they're simply packaging them differently. If you occasionally yearn for that kind of novel, whatever publishers call it, then try **Stranger in My Arms** (Bantam, \$4.99) by R. J. Kaiser. A beautiful young American wakes up in a French hospital with total amnesia. Found unconscious on her sailboat, she's suspected of the death of her lover, who was sailing with her that day. Hillary learns that she's wealthy and spoiled, loose-moraled, and estranged from her handsome husband. But although Hillary's clothes fit her, nothing else seems to. She's shocked by accounts of her life, and she's rapidly falling in love with the stranger who's her husband, a man she'd supposedly grown to despise. Her nightmares about the accident terrify her, but she has to learn the truth—even if it kills her chances of happiness. Then it begins to look as if someone never intended her to recover, and her need to know the truth might actually kill *her*. If this sounds like your kind of book, look for it under "Romance" in your bookstore.

You'll probably find William Shatner's novels on the science fiction shelves of your local bookstore rather than in mystery. No matter. **Tek Secret** (Ace/Putnam, \$19.95) is the fifth novel with Jake Cardigan, private eye. Okay, the year is 2121, but some things never seem to change. A beautiful heiress, Alicia Bower, has disappeared, and her boyfriend is worried sick. Her father, a powerful industrialist, maintains that she's always been irresponsible and will show up sooner or later. Like the other "TekWar" novels, this one is primarily dialogue, and it slides down easily.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Red Rock West is a tidy little thriller with a somewhat unusual pedigree. Most films make the trip from theater to television to video. But for reasons more economic than artistic, this Wyoming-set *film noir* first appeared on TV (HBO), then on video, and finally found its way to movie houses.

Nicholas Cage, in another of his patented offbeat roles, stars as a down-and-out Texan looking for honest work. When he loses a promised job at an oil rig because he's truthful about a bad knee, he heads to the nearest town—Red Rock—to look for work.

It's not much of a place, just a blip on the map, really. It's the kind of small town that's big enough to hold a bar, a convenience store, and not much else: a place most people pass

through on their way to somewhere else. But for Cage it becomes a place that's nearly impossible to escape as he's drawn into a web of deceit, theft, and murder.

When he stops at the bar—Wayne's Place—for a cup of coffee, Cage is mistaken for a hired hitman. "You're here for the job, aren't you?" Wayne the proprietor (J. T. Walsh) asks him.

Cage answers yes, assuming it's some kind of bartending job. But, when to his surprise, he's told the job is to kill the man's wife, he plays along anyway. The five thousand dollar down payment looks pretty attractive to a guy who's down on his luck.

But Cage is no mean drifter looking for a quick buck any way he can get it. He's a genuinely honest man, a guy who

passes up a drawer full of cash at a deserted gas station, and that's what makes his descent into the dark world of killers, thieves, and liars so compelling.

A visit to his intended victim shows more of Cage's honesty. He tells Suzanne (Lara Flynn Boyle) that her husband's hired him to kill her.

"I hate to see an innocent woman hurt," he says in his Texas twang, "but it's an awful lot of money."

Her response is cold. "Suppose I double this if you do something for me—take care of Wayne."

This kind of double-dealing accelerates as the story progresses, enough to make you want to pull on the reins and shout, "Whoa." At the same time, though, the ride is packed with enough unexpected twists and bumps to make you want to gallop along for the excitement.

With so many cleverly interconnected twists, I don't want to give away too much of the plot. Just when you think you have it figured out, another surprise pops up.

Cage, Boyle, and Walsh are all terrific, along with a black-hatted Dennis Hopper, who completes the quartet of quirky characters that lights up the film.

In the middle of mounting

trouble, Cage manages to keep his sad sack look, seemingly wondering, how did I get into this mess? He does well as an innocent man thrown into a not-so-innocent situation, and is an excellent contrast to his cinematic cohorts.

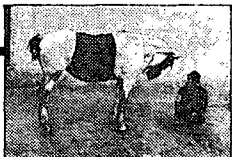
Lara Flynn Boyle fills the role of femme fatale with zest. She's sexy, she knows what she wants, and she'll stop at nothing to get it. She's hot enough to make any man's blood boil, but one thing she isn't is trustworthy.

J. T. Walsh as Wayne recalls a young Ned Beatty in looks and talent. And Dennis Hopper is at his demonic best, crossing and double-crossing everyone he meets.

Director John Dahl, who wrote this film with his brother Rick, offers us a low-key *noir* with the classic components of greed, lust, and a naive fall guy, but the move from the traditional city setting to the West is a welcome one. The movie is an homage to those great B movies of the forties and fifties, no mere imitation.

Unquestionably, this nearly seamless mystery deserves a better fate than what corporate filmdom gave it. But despite its difficult road to wide theatrical release, *Red Rock West* may just realize its destiny as a much-revered cult classic.

THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious Photo-John F. Besnard of Irvine, tions go to Robert V. Kesling Pember of Ocean Shores, of Scottsdale, Arizona; James Wilson of Saint Helens, Oregon; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Randy Melson of Laguna Beach, California; Susan Kloszewski of Woodside, New York; Ruth E. Donald of Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada; and Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada.

graph contest was won by California. Honorable men-of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Shai Washington; Laura McPhee of Scottsdale, Arizona; James Wilson of Saint Helens, Oregon; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Randy Melson of Laguna Beach, California; Susan Kloszewski of Woodside, New York; Ruth E. Donald of Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada; and Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada.

Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

A MINOR IRRITATION by John F. Besnard

"When you ride the range, you take your chances. I knew that when I signed on for this here cattle drive." William "Tex" Brayback appeared to be talking to his horse. "But I never figured on the both of us gettin' robbed this close to Dodge." The horse appeared to be listening, nodding its head up and down each time Tex paused.

"You know what irritates me?" continued Brayback. "I mean, I don't really much mind that they took my money and my guns. A man can earn more money and buy new guns. They're welcome to my sleepin' bag . . . and all them critters I been sleepin' with. I guess I don't even mind that they stole my clothes, leavin' me these black long johns." Tex paused. His horse nodded again. "Not too cold out anyways.

"I suppose you don't much care that them fellers took your saddle? Easier for you. I 'spect you're a mite irritated that they cut off your tail. Heck-fire, you deserved it for not outrunnin' 'em." Tex's horse hooved the ground and gave out a wistful, "Snort."

"I'll tell ya what does git me all fired mad!" Tex started to raise his voice. "I'll tell ya what really chafes me!" Tex was shouting. "I'll tell ya what a man jus' can't stand!" Tex was red-faced. "Them varmints stole my ten-gallon hat and left me wearin' this here stupid lookin' city hat!"

William "Tex" Brayback's horse tried to wag its tail.

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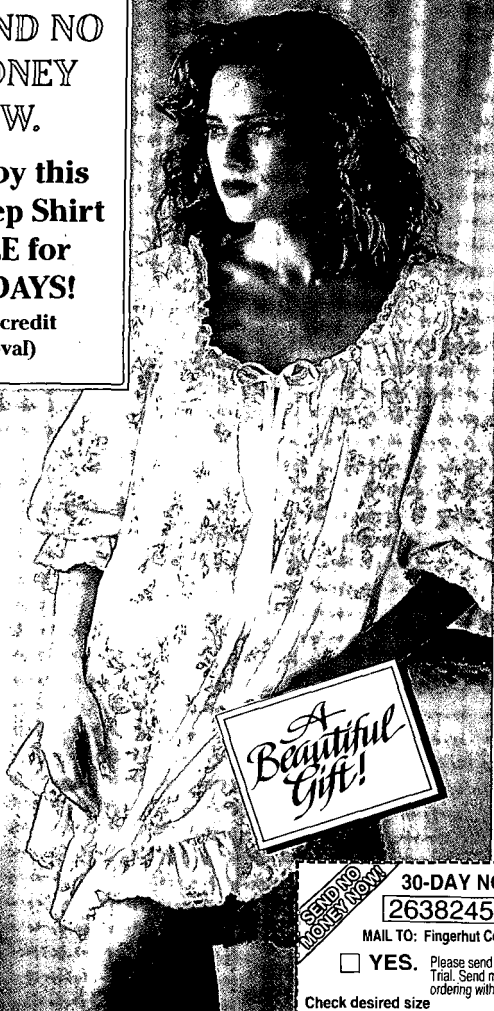
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